



# Russian Silhouettes

NEW, ENLARGED EDITION

Genna Sosonko

"DELIGHTFUL"  
THE WASHINGTON POST

NEW IN CHESS



Genna Sosonko

# **Russian Silhouettes**

**New in Chess 2009 – third, expanded edition**

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All stories in this volume were originally published in New In Chess magazine. New in this edition, the third of *Russian Silhouettes*, is 'In a Silent Way', about Paul Keres.

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Front cover photo: During the World Championship match Botvinnik-Tal in 1960 the playing venue in Moscow was overcrowded. Many spectators followed the games outside the hall.

Photo's: NIC Archives, Boris Turov Archives, the author's personal collection, Joris van Velzen (page 54 bottom), Nigel Eddis (page 116 top), Mariette Gilson (page 118 bottom) and Boris Kurchinen (page 169 top).

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# A Vanished Age

On 18th August 2001 my life will be divided into two equal halves. The first took place in St Petersburg, which was then called Leningrad, and the second in Amsterdam. Although these two cities have much in common, for me St Petersburg and Amsterdam do not overlap. The Neva and the Amstel are different rivers, and if I happen to be walking along Amsterdam's Tsaar Peterstraat or along the Nevsky Prospekt past the Dutch Church in St Petersburg, my peripheral vision registers the difference and I see very well what sets the two cities apart. Just as a child brought up in a dual-language family knows with whom in which language to speak.

The number five tram has not changed its route and it stops close to my house in Amsterdam, just as it did in my past life in Leningrad, but here too no confusion arises. The number of my house in Baskov Lane was 33. For the first ten years in Amsterdam I lived in a house number 22, and in the next ten in a number 11. A few years ago, trying to escape from fate, I moved to a house with a number that had no significance – 16.

Foreigners travelling to the Soviet Union usually found the most attractive part of Leningrad to be old St Petersburg. Now Leningrad has again become St Petersburg, remaining Leningrad for perhaps only its elderly inhabitants who have been accustomed to that name. In chess, the Leningrad Variation of the Dutch Defence interweaves in amazing fashion the two places where I have lived. Although the sounds from the gusts of wind and the pattering of rain on the Neva or the Amstel are hardly any different, for me the move from Leningrad to the city where I now live was more than a geographical displacement in space. This move signified the start of a new life.

My connections with Holland date back as far as my early childhood. Looking back into the past of half a century ago, I can picture my mother, on a December evening in 1948, warming her hands by the Dutch stove. Alongside the Dutch stove was the ottoman on which I slept. There were four of us living together – there was also my grandma and my sister in a twenty-five square metre room of a communal flat, but to me this room did not seem at all small. Living in this flat, apart from ourselves, were the Kantors, the Galperins and the Levin-Cohens. The only Russian was a young woman – Lyuda, but even she had the surname Sarenok. In the first few months in Holland, when I talked about my old home, I was fre-

quently asked: 'But how many bedrooms did you have?' I quickly realised that the correct answer would in no way fit in with the concepts of my listeners, and I used to reply in accordance with my mood: sometimes two, sometimes three. I can remember myself as a boy in the food store on the corner, standing in a queue for the cash desk, in order to punch a receipt for buying some Dutch cheese.

I can also picture myself in an advisory role in a shop on the Nevsky, next to the Khudozhestvenny Cinema, where my mother spent a long time trying on a hat, which for some reason was called a Dutch hat. Smart, with artificial flowers, it was returned to the shop a few hours later, and I was reprimanded: 'How on earth could you advise me to buy that one? – I'm no longer a little girl.'

In my days as a student I went for five years to the University's Geography Faculty opposite a small triangular island called New Holland with its splendid Arch of austere grey beauty. One of Peter the Great's residences was on the island, and the Tsar usually stayed there when he was visiting the Galerny shipyard, where a large number of Dutch craftsmen were at work. He had Amsterdam in mind when he founded his city nearly three hundred years ago.

Peter the Great took numerous words with him from Holland into the Russian language, mainly associated with the sea, leaving the Dutch only two Russian words. The Dutch 'doerak' is by no means as good-natured as the Russian folk tale character 'durachok', whereas the cheerful verb 'pierewaaien' signifies in Dutch 'to go on a spree', rather than the Russian 'pirovatj', which stands for 'to celebrate with feasting'. The lengthy banquets of the young Russian Tsar and the numerous attendants from his embassy, which was in Amsterdam for several months, made a strong impression on the Dutch.

In August 1972 the match between Fischer and Spassky, one of the most intriguing World Championship Matches in the history of the game, was in full swing, but I had no time to think about chess: I was leaving the Soviet Union.

Holland represented the interests of Israel, which at that time did not have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and I obtained my exit visa in the Dutch Embassy in Moscow. It was very close to the Central Chess Club, the way to which was familiar to me from the times of junior tournaments.

On ending up outside the boundaries of the Soviet Union, I had the sense of being in the position of a new-born child: my customary situation had disappeared, and a large, unknown world lay before me. I was twenty-nine years old. When I left, I thought that in order to begin a new life, I would have to forget completely about the old one. This proved impossible. The prerogative of disregarding the past belonged only to the Russian Tsar, and Perseus knew long ago that, if after lengthy efforts a dog finally breaks free from its tether and runs away, there will still be a large section of chain hanging round its neck.

My present became what it was largely thanks to my past, which I had wanted to reject. In fact it was deposited in my memory and in the end crystallised out. But it also happened the other way round: the past would not have been aroused from my memory, without this Western period of my life. Moreover, had it not been for this second, Dutch half of my life, Russia would not have been opened for me. In order to become aware of Russia, I had to move away from it, and see it from a distance. In order to look at it differently, new eyes were needed, because the old ones could see only that which they had been trained to see. Although the Dutch half of my life differs sharply from the first half spent in Russia, it rests on the old half, like an elephant on a tortoise in the Indian parable. They cannot be separated, just as it is impossible to hear the clapping of only one hand.

I was taught to play chess by my mother. In the centre of the room, directly opposite the Dutch stove, stood the dining-table, covered by a faded oil-cloth. Sometimes in the evening, after supper, an old cardboard board would appear on it, and we would play draughts or chess. The board was torn in several places, particularly on the g2 square. Psychoanalysts will easily link this fact with my predilection for the fianchetto of my king's bishop throughout my professional career. We didn't have any chess pieces; we played with bits of paper, on which my mother had written the names of the pieces. Once we were caught at this by my mother's brother Uncle Volodya, and he bought us a chess set. The head of one of the white knights soon became unstuck from its base, and when we were playing it was simply laid flat on the board. My mother's other brother, Adolf, died early in 1941. With such a name things would not have been easy for him during the war.

My mother had been taught to play chess by her father, my granddad, whom I never saw. A year before I was born, during the Leningrad siege, granddad Ruvim died of starvation in January 1942. It was a very cold

winter and in the building it was not much warmer than on the street. In the room where I was to live the first half of my life, granddad Ruvim lay for more than a week, until my grandma, who herself could move only with difficulty, managed to take him on a sledge to the cemetery. Here he was buried in a common grave together with thousands of other victims of the siege.

My grandma Tamara, swaying in front of some lighted candles was saying something in a strange language. 'Grandma', I asked her, 'grandma, are you praying to God? Why then don't you go to church?' 'When you grow up you'll understand', she replied simply. When I was a little older, my grandma would sometimes talk to me in Yiddish, she died when I was six years old. My German is my Dutch diluted with the Yiddish of grandma Tamara, with an occasional sprinkling of German words.

In the meantime my father had another family, and when I was asked about him, I used to say: 'My father does not live with us.' We had no contact. When filling in a form or the special column in the class register, where information about your parents was required, I always felt uncomfortable and envied the boys who proudly wrote about their father: 'He fell at the front.' I only saw my father a handful of times. The last one was in a crowded trolley-bus on the Nevsky, when, after giving an affirmative reply to the question as to whether I was getting off at the next stop, I turned round and saw him. My father did not recognise me – he was very short-sighted. The following year he died.

My mother always began a game of chess by advancing both of her central pawns two squares. I, naturally, followed her example. It is probably this that explains my liking for space and for central play, which I still retain to this day. When playing football in Tavrichesky Park in the summer of 1954, I broke my arm. Sentenced to the wearing of a plaster for a month, I played chess. This fascination went a long way, and I am experiencing the complicated consequences of it to this day. Now, almost half a century later, when I am no longer playing chess, or playing only rarely, it sometimes happens that my arm hurts in that place where it was broken. The doctor says that this is the fruit of my imagination and that it is impossible.

After finishing school I entered the Geography Faculty of the University. The studies there were not very onerous, and there was plenty of time left for chess. I specialised in the economic geography of the capitalist countries. As a chess encyclopaedia, published in England, remarks: '...thereby fitting himself for his future career in the West.' Although I was a master in

the Soviet Union, I played little, spending more time on training work. At one time I used to help Tal, and in the last year before my departure Kortchnoi. My decision to leave the country was not liked by the authorities. On a stand in the foyer of the Chigorin Club, for a long time after I had left, two notices were pinned up. On one of them, under a list of the Leningrad team, one could read: trainer – master G. Sosonko, while the other was a decree of the Sports Committee regarding my disqualification as a result of my betrayal of the motherland. They happily existed side by side, until someone decided to remove the first one.

My genuine professional chess career began in the West. For the sake of brevity I shortened my name, and for solidity I added an ‘n’ to it. I was briefly tempted to keep my full name after a Dutch journalist divided it into two parts, imparting to it an aristocratic Italian sound: Genna di Sosonko. Even more curious was its writing in the Chinese manner So-son-ko on the programme of a simultaneous display which I gave somewhere in Belgium in the spring of 1974.

The Gena who lived in Russia and the Genna who appeared in the West, bear the same surname, but in many respects they are very different people, not to say totally different. The inscription recently made on the book of a friend from the first period of my life: ‘To Genna, whom I still remember as Gena’, I did not take at all as a joke. It’s more than years and versts that separate me from Russia.

Two months after I settled down in Holland, I began working for *Schaakbulletin*. This magazine was the predecessor of *New In Chess*, in which most of the stories comprising this book were first published. I combined working for the magazine with playing in tournaments. As my successes grew, playing became more important.

In the spring of 1973 I had a conversation with lieutenant-colonel Z. He offered me a job – teaching Russian in Harderwijk. These were intensive army courses that taught the young men the language of the most probable enemy. The lieutenant-colonel himself spoke excellent Russian. Much to his surprise I declined, explaining that my hobby had become my profession. In contrast to the shaky existence of a chess professional, he was offering something highly respectable, but even so, it restricted something for the sake of which I had left the Soviet Union. When we said goodbye, he gave me his visiting card: ‘Just in case you change your mind.’ Sorting out some old papers recently, I came across it and could not decide immediately to which period of my life it related. It is unlikely to be of any use now.

I don't know how my life would have turned out, had I accepted his offer. One thing is obvious: I would not have seen the world to the extent that I have seen it thanks to my profession.

Playing chess at a professional level demands extreme concentration, intensity, and a complete absorption in another, artificial world. I always found it difficult switching from my normal state to the world of tournament chess, and those who know me in these two states will tell you that they know two different people. Chess has given me a great deal. This world of play is like life in miniature. In chess too you cannot take a move back, and time for a game is also restricted.

Looking at chess, one can say that its present is uncertain, its future uneasy, and only the past remains brilliant for ever. Although I know that it was no great mind who came up with the thought that in olden times the sky was more blue, the girls were prettier, queen sacrifices were more spectacular, and finally, that the people in chess were more interesting, I cannot dismiss the thought: it's true, it's true...

*Goldene Schachzeiten* was the title given by Milan Vidmar to his book about chess in the first half of the 20th century, but was not the whole of the last century a golden one? Would not the great players of the past, looking at the chess of the start of the new century, have experienced something akin to the feelings of Lorentz? The creator of the classical theory of atoms regretted that he had lived through to the triumph of quantum mechanics and had seen how everything in his science, including his own contributions, had become uncertain.

From a world of romanticism, dreams and uncertainty, chess has been transformed into the severe truth of life. Just as a ballerina having danced the part of Cinderella and who, after the performance, ends up on an operating table due to severe appendicitis, is transformed into the world of reality.

The chess of the past, with its halo of mysteriousness, may seem naïve and full of mistakes. But in the second half of the 21st century, will not the chess of the first half seem the same? We are approaching the revealing of the last secret of the game: given correct play, is the advantage of the first move sufficient for a win, as Philidor asserted, or if the game is conducted ideally does a draw nevertheless result? But who can give a guarantee that this last truth in chess will prove interesting? Fortunately, chess has strong arguments in its defence. W.H. Auden wrote that poetry is a completely non-essential thing, and it justifies the fact that it exists only by the fact that it is completely not essential to know it. These words equally apply to chess.

Since 1974 I played for the Dutch team against the Soviet Union in Olympiads and European Championships. It need hardly be said that these games were quite different for me than those in matches for Holland against, say, Mexico or Iceland. At the Olympiad in Buenos Aires in 1978 the Soviet Union met Holland in the last round, and whether or not the USSR won the Olympiad depended on the outcome of this match. The night before the last round, the leaders of the Soviet team tried to persuade me not to play in that match. The conversation took place on various levels, from 'the possibilities of obtaining entry visas to our country are not unlimited', to 'don't forget that you still have a sister in Leningrad'. They did not manage to convince me. 'I am playing for Holland, not against the Soviet Union', I repeated, which was not entirely true. A short line from a Soviet newspaper – 'in the USSR-Holland match, Polugaevsky's game on board two ended in a draw' – was my reward: after my departure, my name could not appear in the Soviet press. A report in the Leningrad sports paper, about how 1st-3rd places in the 1973 Dutch Championship were shared by Enklaar and Zuidema, is something that I retain to this day.

The tournament in Waddinxveen in 1979 was opened by the Dutch Prime Minister Van Agt. Also present was the Soviet Union's Ambassador Tolstikov, who in my time had been the Party boss in Leningrad. 'Do you know the Dutch expression 'Keep your chin up'? – the Prime-Minister asked me, wishing me luck in the tournament. 'Well, you are a Leningrader, keep your chin up. Show them what we're worth, Leningrader', with deliberate rudeness repeated the Ambassador, a Khrushchev-type of man, short and fat. I did not know whom to listen to, and with mixed feelings I began my first game with Karpov. The words 'Keep your chin up, Leningrader' pursued me for a long time.

Participating in Olympiads, European Championships or in international tournaments, I regularly met players from the Soviet Union, and not only at the chess board. I knew most of them from the time when I myself had lived there. Some of them were my friends. Contact with an emigrant could not be approved by the leader of the delegation, who was nearly always present at a foreign tournament in which Soviet players were taking part. Therefore we usually met a block or two away from the hotel, and for walks we chose streets that were as distant as possible. On the pages of Soviet newspapers at that time one could come across the expression 'internal emigrant'. My friends undoubtedly came under this definition. For some of them the internal emigration proved too restricting, so they left the Soviet Union and now live in various countries.

When going off to Interzonals and other official tournaments, Soviet grandmasters were presented with dossiers on the foreign participants in these tournaments. The dossiers were usually compiled by students from the chess department of the Institute of Physical Culture. They gave a detailed analysis of both the positive aspects of a player and his weaknesses. Obtaining them from my friends, on a couple of occasions I read the descriptions of me myself. They were sensibly written, and I read them with great interest, since it is always curious to know what is thought about you by others, especially when they are not known to you at all.

Nearly all the emigrants who left Russia after 1917 regarded themselves as a part of Russia that had temporarily gone abroad, rather than having left the country for good. When I left the Soviet Union, I knew that I was leaving for ever. Those were the rules of the game: the state unwillingly gave permission for emigration (if it gave it at all), and emigration had to be complete and final. Any attempt to visit the country later was doomed to failure. I knew that I would never see either those close to me, or my city again. It was with this feeling – for ever – that I said goodbye to them – for ever. At the end of 1974 my mother was not allowed to come and stay with me in Amsterdam, and six months later I did not even make the hopeless attempt to bid a last farewell to her in Leningrad.

In the second half of August 1982 the telephone rang in my house, and a business-like voice informed me that an exhibition chess tournament was to be held on a cruise ship and invited me to take part in it. This did not fit in with my plans. I had little time as I was busy preparing for the tournament in Tilburg – then the strongest in the world. I declined, but before hanging up, I enquired about the route of the ship. ‘The Baltic Sea’, said the manager, ‘the usual route – Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki.’ ‘And then?’ I asked. ‘Then Leningrad’, he said with indifference. I looked at the calendar – it was 18th August, the tenth anniversary of my departure. I said that I would think about it.

My friends and acquaintances advised me not to go on the trip, and an official from the Foreign Ministry in The Hague, whom I phoned for consultation, quite reasonably remarked: ‘Of course, you have a Dutch passport, but these are uncertain times, and anything can happen, you must know that...’ I said to myself that they were right.

My heart missed a beat when, on the morning of 12th September, a young frontier guard by the gangplank of the ‘Lady Astor’ threw my Dutch passport into a deep box, after giving me, along with the other passengers

who were setting off on an excursion to The Hermitage, a red-coloured document. On opening it, one could read the rules of behaviour for passengers of the cruise ship. One of the first points described precisely that, for the sake of which I had made the trip: it was forbidden to undertake any individual actions, not connected with the excursion programme.

The Intourist bus was held up on the Dvortsovy Bridge, bogged down by a mass of runners, clad in track suits. Later I learned that 'Runner's Day' was one of the largest new mass sports festivals in the Soviet Union. It was a wonderful September day. The Neva was sparkling in the sunshine, and, looking around, I could see on the left the buildings of the University and the Cabinet of Curiosities, and on the right the Rostral Columns and the Peter and Paul Fortress. The guide in the bus did not waste time: 'Directly in front of you is The Hermitage. The museum houses one of the greatest collections of pictures in the world. The Hermitage was founded...' In front of The Hermitage my sister, who had been notified beforehand, was due to be waiting for me. My eyes, which for a decade had become estranged from contours familiar from childhood, easily absorbed them. It was the sounds of voices that were surprising: the bus windows were open and all the people on the run were talking in the language of my youth. Within a quarter of an hour the mass of people had abated, and the bus started moving...

Space is measured in time. It now separates Amsterdam from St Petersburg by a three-hour flight. In St Petersburg, as in Amsterdam, I have routes that I like to follow on my walks. I go along the Nevsky, always keeping to one side, just as I used to do when I was an inhabitant of this city. On reaching the intersection of the Nevsky Prospekt with Vosstaniya Street, I halt for an instant. At this place I stood with my mother and sister in an immobile crowd on a cold March day in 1953. People were standing everywhere – on the pavements, on the carriageways, on the balustrades of the metro station that was being built, and many were crying. The time was five minutes to twelve, and suddenly the sirens and horns of the immobile vehicles began to scream. All the men removed their fur hats, and my mother began untying the ear-flaps of mine. It was the day of Stalin's funeral.

I turn to the left, pass several blocks, and then, in the corner, there is the house. I climb up to the first floor. The steps of the staircase are so worn that it is hard to believe that they are made of stone. Our flat no longer exists. It is now used for book-keeping courses. They were also held in my time – in the door opposite, and on the landing, during breaks between

classes, aspiring book-keepers were always smoking. The kitchen of our communal flat is now a classroom. In place of the large flagstone, on which stood the oil-stoves and primuses, and where our neighbour Tsilya Naumovna was usually stewing udders, bought at the Maltsevsky market, there are now several computers. The room where I lived is the director's office, and on the door is a sign showing the hours of admission. Of those who once lived in this room, I am the only one still alive.

I am completely calm when I think about them, and not because I know that we all are mortal. I know that living in the graveyard one cannot weep for everyone, even for those to whom you were part of life, and to some even life itself. Memories crowd into my mind one after another, like the enormous stones of the Wailing Wall. If anything I am pleased, when there suddenly arises another one, which appeared to have been buried for ever: a meeting of the inhabitants of the flat, and passionate debates about the need to castrate Barsik, the communal cat, who does not suspect anything and is playing here in the kitchen. Or the expression of Polina Saulovna, a very old woman, with feeling reciting to me, a six-year-old, the fable 'The dragon-fly and the ant'.

Two brilliant Russian writers of the twentieth century lived in this city. Both of them left Russia. One went in April 1919 by boat from Sevastopol. The other, in May 1972, took the Aeroflot flight to Vienna, the usual route to freedom at that time. Three months later I was to take the same route. Neither Vladimir Nabokov nor Iosif Brodsky ever returned to St Petersburg. Nabokov did not heed the advice of his friend Prince Kachurin to travel there incognito. Instead of himself he sent his Alter Ego in one of his verses.

Brodsky has not really been back either, although he was invited. Having once seen the real Venice, he preferred it for ever to the northern one. Like Nabokov, Brodsky too returned several times to his city in his poems and essays, although he also recognised that in terms of hopelessness, all attempts to revive the past are similar to endeavours to comprehend the meaning of life.

Looking at the past, I realise that it has changed. I am aware that the past ages with every day, drowns in the present, and is revived with difficulty. In reality we are writing about what this past has become in the present. It is far easier to write about the past than to be in it. The unrealised, the lost, that which could have been carried out and will never be carried out, makes any past painfully sad. In order to accept the past, one requires the

courage of reconciliation – the ability to see everything in the way that this past actually was, without embellishment, wrappings or illusions.

I know that memory is optimistic. Certain scenes appear to me now, decades later, to be more idyllic than they were in actual fact, or, at any rate, less coloured by the emotions of the moment. Memory is able not only to wash away the dark tones of the pain of the past, but it also possesses the ability to brighten up sorrowful memories.

‘By-passing the palaces and galleries of memory’, as St Augustin put it, I sometimes stumble across something amusing or insignificant. My memory constantly deviates from the main paths, but sometimes some trifling act, joke or word, flung by chance, says no less than authorised documents.

At the age of 88, Bertrand Russell remembered Gladstone, whom he had seen in 1889, when the latter was an old man. After dinner, they – the only men – remained at the table. Russell, who was then seventeen, expected to hear something divine. ‘This is a very good port. I wonder why they have given it me in a Bordeaux glass?’ said Gladstone, and this port, poured into a Bordeaux glass, is closer for me than all the sayings of the great Englishman.

‘For correspondence’, a boy replied to me at a tournament in Indonesia in 1982, and I remember his crafty smile to this day. I had just given him my autograph, and he had asked me to write my address alongside it.

I see Misha Tal, lighting another cigarette and with a nervous movement crossing out a move already written on his scoresheet. I see the bushy eye-brows of Lev Polugaevsky and his sorrowful look before he lands the decisive blow in one of our games. Of the game itself only the vague contours remain in my memory, and recently, in order to restore it, I had to resort to the help of my computer database.

I am one of those people who are strong on hindsight, and too often in life, and also in chess, I have relied on the Russian ‘avoss’: it will return, and somehow it will turn out right.

Now I feel annoyed about the fact that many conversations with the protagonists of this book have remained forgotten. I also regret that the questions, answers to which could now have been of interest to the reader, were simply never asked. At the time these questions did not occur to me: the everyday trifles seemed more important. The rare jottings of those times are an indifferent aid to the memory, and old photographs can only scare away recollections. It is a well-known paradox: the more you look at

familiar features on photographs from the distant past, the paler the image itself becomes.

Those about whom I have written are no longer with us. But it depends on how you look at it. I see their faces, their gestures and their manner of speaking. I hear their voices. Referring to them signifies going backwards on the river Lethe, to there where there is no future, and where there is only the past. To there where everything, once and for all, is put in its place: to the young Lev Polugaevsky on the beach in Sukhumi, to Misha Tal, trying to elicit from the laughing Maestro about how exactly the Civil War in Spain began, to Semyon Furman, bent low over his transistor radio, to Olga Capablanca, examining a medallion depicting the last Russian Tsar in the window of an antique shop on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan.

I knew that time does the same thing to people that space does to monuments: if you stand too close or too far away, you risk not seeing anything; both the one and the other can be appreciated at a distance, from a specially chosen point. I have endeavoured to find that point.

While appreciating the great difficulty of the task, I should have liked to at least approach that depiction of them, where the last truth is lit up by the funeral carriage, knowing that a textbook, polished image of these people would be unworthy of them and far from reality.

All of those described in this book were linked, in some way or another, with the country in which I lived the first half of my life – the Soviet Union. Just as it is not possible, without damaging the pediment of a 19th-century building, to remove the emblem with the hammer and sickle, painted on it in Soviet times, so it is impossible to imagine those, who are described in this book, outside of that time when the red colour of the state that no longer exists dominated the world map. Chess in the Soviet Union, under the unremitting attention and control of the authorities, was closely amalgamated with politics, like everything in that amazing country. The closed nature of society, and its isolation from the free world, were reasons why talent and energy frequently splashed out in comparatively neutral fields.

This closed nature and isolation of society merely assisted the development of chess, creating an entire cultural stratum, the enormous world of Soviet chess. This world consisted of a large army of professional players, official and covert, as well as trainers and organisers. This world has gone for ever, with its crowds of fans, following the games of world championship matches on enormous demonstration boards, installed on a theatre

building in the centre of Moscow, because there were no free places in the auditorium. In this world pensioners bent over chess boards on park benches in twenty degrees of frost and old women, patiently awaited their grandchildren at a theoretical lesson, where they were first showed the Legall mate. This was a world where matches for the world chess championship made the front pages of newspapers, and life itself inspired the libretto of a musical, which for years played to packed houses in the best theatres of London and New York.

In this world participation in the championship final of the country was an achievement in itself, a dream that remained unfulfilled for many strong masters. This was an era when the public, with their subtle understanding of the game, frequently rewarded with applause a pretty win or a spectacular combination. For several hours at a time one could exchange opinions about the positions on the stage with a completely unknown person, and then part with him for ever or, on the contrary, become a friend for life. In the press centre of such championships one could meet masters and grandmasters, whose names would be an enhancement to any international tournament. For the bulletins, devoted to each round of the championship, one had to queue at newspaper kiosks, and radio reports from the tournaments were broadcast in the sports section of the latest news.

The names of the people from that world, about whom I have written, were on everyone's lips, and in popularity they were not inferior to film stars. It would be a pity if these names were irrevocably lost. The odd details, which I have unconsciously stored in the money-box of memory, have been fused together, creating portraits of people whom I had the good fortune to meet. Gathered together, these portraits have unexpectedly become the sum of my personal experiences during the past years.

Each time after one of those, whom this book is about, passed away, I wanted to read about them. Later I realised that I wanted to read about them what I myself knew. More than this – what only I knew. Deprived of this possibility, I decided to write about them. Hence this book.

# My Misha

Mikhail Tal

‘My head is filled with sunshine’ – these were the first words of the 23-year-old Misha Tal in an overcrowded hall in Moscow, immediately after his brilliant victory in the candidates tournament in Yugoslavia in 1959. It was there, too, that he said: ‘In the first game of the match with Botvinnik I will play e2-e4 and beat him!’

In the mid-50s a young man, practically a boy, with fiery black eyes and a manner of playing that surprised everyone, burst into the world of strictly positional chess. His manner of playing amazed some and shocked others. A Dutch newspaper made an observation that was typical of the general reaction of the entire chess world: ‘For a player of world class, Tal’s play is amazingly reckless, not to say foolhardy and irresponsible. For the moment he is successful, because even the most experienced and tested defenders are unable to withstand this terror on the chess board. He aims first and foremost for attack, and in his games one commonly sees sacrifices of one or even several pieces. Opinions are sharply divided about this foolhardy way of playing. Some see him as nothing more than a gambler, who has luck on his side, while others think that he is a genius who is opening up unknown fields in chess.’

Although he was already the challenger, Tal had met the world champion only once, during the Olympiad in Munich in 1958, where they played together on the Soviet team. The story that the little Misha, with a chess board under his arm, was not admitted by Botvinnik, when the latter was spending a holiday by the seaside near Riga in 1948, is of course a fabrication by journalists. Strolling between the tables, while his opponent was considering his move, the world champion asked the young candidate: ‘Why did you sacrifice that pawn?’ And he received a ‘hooliganish’, as Misha himself expressed it, reply: ‘That pawn was simply in my way.’ He loved this word ‘hooligan’, and often, when analysing, if he suggested some unclear sacrifice, he would add: ‘Let’s have a bit of hooliganism.’

I got to know Misha in the Autumn of 1967. He had come from Riga to Leningrad for a few days, and in the small room of a mutual acquaintance we played an enormous number of blitz games, of which I managed to win one and draw a few. After a few more visits we became friends, and it

did not come as a surprise when he invited me to Riga, to his city, to work together. He was preparing for a match with Gligoric. Of course, for me this was a flattering invitation. During this and subsequent visits to Riga, I must have spent something like half a year with him.

I would arrive at about eleven at his big flat in the centre of Riga, and within half an hour we would be sitting at the chess board. Now, a quarter of a century later, I realise that variations were not especially necessary for him. The most important thing for him – and here I completely agree with Spassky – was to create a situation on the board, where his pieces came alive, and for him, as for no one else, they did indeed become alive. His credo was to create tension and to seize the initiative, to create a position such that the spiritual factor – that of giving mate – would prevail over and even laugh at material values.

We spent a mass of time on variations such as 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bg5 c5, and the pawn sacrifice d4-d5 in the Queen's Indian Defence which he employed in a little-known training game with Kholmov. But we also looked at the Nimzo, and the Spanish, which turned out to be the main openings in his match with Gligoric.

Quite often Misha's permanent trainer Alexander Koblenz, 'Maestro' to his friends, would arrive. This is also what Misha invariably called him. Behind their distinctive jokingly-ironic manner of conversing lay a sincere attachment that went back many years. 'That's enough for today' Misha would say, 'Blitz, blitz.' Sacrificing pieces against each of us in turn, for the most part, incorrectly, he would repeat: 'Never mind, now I'll make his flag fall.' Or in very sharp situations, when he himself had only a few seconds left, his favourite: 'Calmness is my sweetheart.' I do not recall an occasion when he played blitz without any evident pleasure. Whether it was a game from the championships of Moscow or Leningrad, most of which were won by him, the world championship in Saint John in 1988, or simply a five-minute game with an amateur who had cornered him in a hotel foyer.

The computer age was a long way off, Gligoric's games were scattered about in various bulletins, and in searching for them Misha would often get sidetracked in one of the magazines that had been sent to him from various countries of the world, and, glancing at a diagram, would suggest: 'How about, instead, looking at the games from the last championship of Columbia?'

'Perhaps you should take a break?' would suggest Misha's mother, Ida Grigoryevna, a tall, imposing woman. She was the oldest sister of a bourgeois Jewish family from Riga, which fate had scattered throughout the

world. Her sister Riva lived in The Hague from the late 30s, and Misha nearly always used to see her during his frequent visits to Holland. As a young girl she had gone for six months to Paris, to improve her French, but fate had turned out differently. The first time that Aunt Riva saw her famous nephew was in 1959 in Zurich, when she learned about the coming chess tournament there. 'He was all full of energy, so bright,' she said, 'and that tall thin American, still just a boy, he used literally to hang on every word of Misha.'

She had another sister, Ganya – two years younger – who settled in Brooklyn, New York, and whom I remember well from when she was in Riga.

The surname of Misha's mother, who died in 1979, was Tal, like Misha's father: she married her cousin. In an enormous flat (by my concepts at the time) there lived: Misha's mother, Misha's elder brother Yasha, who outlived her only by a short time, Misha himself with his girlfriend, who emigrated in 1972 and who lives, as far as I know, in Germany, Misha's first wife, Sally, who left the country in 1980 and now lives in Antwerp, and their son Gera, a charming boy with fair curly hair, now the father of three children and a dentist in Beer-Sheva, in Israel. In 1980, in my house in Amsterdam, Misha several times met his son. The times then were not so liberal, and an open meeting between a father and an émigré son, even in the presence only of fellow-grandmasters, could have had unpleasant consequences, such as being forbidden to travel abroad for two years or more (which Misha in fact had to experience in his time).

Nearly every evening they were visited by Uncle Robert, as everyone called him, a friend of Misha's father who was a doctor. He was a wonderful man, according to all who knew him. He died in 1957. Uncle Robert, a taxi-driver in Paris in the 20s, who had lost all his family during the war, himself rather a weak player, could watch for hours our analysis and blitz games, looking at Misha with loving eyes. Sometimes he would reprimand Misha for something, Misha would defend himself weakly, and Ida Grigoryevna, who always took the side of Uncle Robert, would say: 'Misha, don't be rude, please; don't forget that he is after all your father.' It was a well-kept family secret that his Uncle Robert was his biological father. Now, a quarter of a century later, with all of them gone, I can picture very well Uncle Robert with his invariable cigarette in his nicotine-stained fingers, often with a glass of cognac, and Misha, especially in his later years, so similar to him in appearance, manner of speaking, and holding himself.

During these squabbles I used to avert my eyes in embarrassment, but no one paid any attention to me, since they accepted me as one of their own.

But then evening would arrive, and we would have to go somewhere to eat. A taxi was summoned, and we would drive to one of the restaurants, where, of course, Misha was always recognised. When Tal became world champion he was presented with a 'Volga' – effectively the top brand of Soviet car at that time. But he gave the car to his brother. He was totally indifferent to any form of technology, and it goes without saying that he never entertained any thoughts of learning to drive. Only in the last period of his life did he acquire an electric razor, and the marks of its actions could be seen here and there on his face. In my time the shaving procedure was entrusted to his elder brother, or more often, and always when he was away, he went to a barber's. He did not like ties, and wore one only when circumstances demanded it. Needless to say, he never learned how to fasten one. And he never wore a watch. 'What's that! You've got something ticking on your arm!' For him, time in the accepted sense did not exist. I recall many a missed train, and from the days of his youth there was the story of how he once attempted to overtake a plane by taxi by exploiting the plane's three-hour stop-over, which, according to eye-witnesses, was completely successful.

In taxis we often played a game which I first learned from him: from the four figures of the number of the car in front, one had to make 21 using each figure only once. I found it hard to follow as he triumphantly achieved this with a complicated arrangement of roots, differentials and integrals.

During dinner and frequently after it, we would drink. Misha did not like and did not drink wine, preferring something stronger: vodka, cognac or rum-cola, for example. To avoid any misunderstanding, I must say immediately that this was no slow sipping through a straw. To this day I remember the face of the barman in Wijk aan Zee, at our first meeting outside Russia in January 1973, when he had to pour five portions of cognac into one glass. A few years ago, Misha, who by then found it hard to take his drink, simply fell asleep at the end of a banquet in Reykjavik. This happened to him increasingly often, especially in his last years. Kortchnoi and Spassky, who were also playing there, at that time had strained relations. But it couldn't be helped, and they looked at each other: 'Carry him out?' asked one. 'Alright', replied the other. The distance was considerable, but the opponents of his youth coped admirably with their

task, and to the dumbfounded hotel porter it was explained that this chess player had thought for a long time, and he was very tired.

I remember very well his sparkling, always gentle humour, his laughter, infectious and often leading to tears, his instant reactions in conversation, and his trademark expression, usually around midnight: 'Waiter! Please change my table companion!' I think it was Sheridan who said that genuine humour is much closer to good nature than we think. Misha's wit was always genuine.

Despite a physical defect – from his birth he had only three fingers on his right hand – he played the piano, and not at all badly. His first wife, Sally, remembers that on the evening when they met, Misha was playing some Chopin etudes. Besides Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov were his favourite composers. A few months before his first match with Botvinnik, he asked the well-known pianist Bella Davidovich, with whom Tal was particularly friendly, whether Rachmaninov's 'Elegy' was part of her repertoire. On learning that it was not, he said: 'Promise me that after my victory over Botvinnik you will play it at the concluding concert.' In the Soviet Union at that time, after the opening or closing ceremony of a chess tournament or match, there was the custom of arranging a variety concert. On the evening after the 17th game, when the match score became 10-7 in Tal's favour, the telephone rang in the Davidovich flat: 'You can begin practising the 'Elegy'...' When she plays Rachmaninov's 'Elegy' Bella Davidovich always remembers Misha Tal and that evening in the Pushkin Theatre, when she performed it for the first time.

In the summer, during my visits when he was preparing for the match with Kortchnoi, we often went to the Riga seaside, where he had been given a dacha, or, more correctly, three rooms on the second floor of a house beside the beach. When I look back now it requires some effort to picture Misha on the beach in sunny weather in an improvised goal (a T-shirt and a beach bag) recklessly, like everything that he did, parrying my attempts to score a goal. He had played goalkeeper in a university team, and he retained an attachment to football until the end of his life.

He never enjoyed good health. At that time, both in Riga and at the seaside, he suffered kidney failure, and frequently an ambulance had to be summoned. He was often in hospital, and during his life he underwent twelve surgical operations. His forehead bore the scars of a fearful blow to the head by a bottle in a Havana night bar during the Olympiad in Cuba in

1966. There was a well-known joke by Petrosian at that time: 'Only someone with the robust health of Tal could endure such a blow.' It was in the late 60s, that Misha became addicted to morphine. The veins on his arms were black and blue as if covered with ant bites, and the nurses, trying in vain to find a place that had not yet been touched. I know that later too, in Moscow, ambulances were forbidden to come at the summons of Tal. Rumours about this used to spread around the city.

At one of his lectures someone asked: 'Is it true that you are a morphinist, comrade Tal?' And his lightning response: 'What do you mean? I'm a chigorinist...' I think that this period lasted a couple of years. How he kicked the habit, I do not know. A guess: when the drug dose threatened to exceed legal limits, his strength of spirit and will themselves put an end to it.

Why did he play like he did, and why did he win? Of course, it is easy to hide behind the words talent or genius. Tolush, after losing the game of his life in his best tournament in 1957, said to Spassky: 'You know, Borya, today I lost to a genius.' At the Interzonal tournament in Taxco, another strong grandmaster said to me without any flattery: 'We are none of us worth Misha's little finger.' And Petrosian himself, who was sparing in his praise, said that in chess he knew only one living genius.

But that is not the point, or, at least, not the only point. I am reluctant to follow Kortchnoi. When I asked him about the secret of Tal's play he retorted: 'Well, you know, don't you? Once in a restaurant Tal said to me: 'If you want, I'll look at that waiter, and he will come up to us.' ' Pal Benko thought similarly when he put on dark glasses at the 1959 candidates tournament as an inadequate defence against Tal's piercing eyes. Still, the fact that his entire appearance, especially in his younger years, radiated some kind of aura – this is certain. Here we have approached the mystery, as I see it, of the Mikhail Tal phenomenon.

That face bent over the board, that stare of burning eyes, penetrating the board and the opponent, those moving lips, that smile which appeared on his inspired face when a combination had been found, that intense concentration of thought, pressure of thought rather – all this created something that the weak of spirit could not withstand. And when this spirit was combined with the energy of youth in the late fifties and early sixties, he was invincible. 'You, Mishik', the late Leonid Stein said to him in Riga in 1969 'are stronger in spirit than all of us.' He was strong in spirit, like no one

else. Even when his organism was destroyed, right to the end, to his last days, his spirit remained unbowed.

In 1979, after winning a major tournament in Montreal together with Karpov, the 43-year-old Tal, who was more balanced and understood chess much better than in his years as champion, said: 'Now I would smash that younger Tal to pieces.' I have my doubts. And not because his favourite squares e6, d5 and f5, as he himself expressed it, were now guarded more strictly. No, the point was that the erudite and all-comprehending Tal would have had to withstand the concentration of thought and pressure of youth, which the best of the best had been unable to withstand.

In the summer of 1968 I was Misha's second for his match with Kortchnoi, a very uncomfortable opponent for him. Tal lost the match 4½-5½. In the last game Misha, with Black, built up a strong attack in a Dutch Defence and could have won, but he delayed and the adjourned position did not promise more than a draw. A sleepless night of analysis followed, the resumption, the closing ceremony, and a lengthy wandering around Moscow, where he had so many friends. His energy, his inexhaustible energy... There was a wooden house in the very centre of Moscow, by the main Post Office, where the artist Igin lived, who has now long been dead. He was a friend of many chess players, who would drop in to see him at any time of day or night. Artists, poets, young actresses, bohemian Moscow of the sixties and seventies, and the picturesque host himself, who described himself succinctly as 'an old cognac-drinker'. And finally, the last flight from Moscow to Riga, no tickets, but they recognised Misha, and there we were in the pilots' cabin flying to Riga, night, Misha's flat, and I, no longer feeling anything, fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning, the room was thick with cigarette smoke, and somewhere in the background Misha was sitting on a divan looking at me with a thick book in his hands that had almost been finished. He read exceptionally quickly, and I knew, in the Western part of my life, that when I set off to some tournament I had to take with me as many as possible of the books that were then banned in the Soviet Union. At the Olympiad in Nice in 1974 I gave him one evening a copy of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, which had just been published, and the latest issue of a Russian émigré newspaper. The following morning, returning it to me after reading it all, he said: 'In the newspaper crossword I couldn't find a single word'. 'But the book, what about the book?' 'He writes very maliciously...' At the time, I was staggered by the reply, but a

vague explanation, another aspect revealing the personality of Mikhail Tal, occurred to me. The point was that on the whole this did not interest him. He was not at all interested in material values, as if he dissociated himself from such matters.

After one of the tournaments in Tilburg I was sharing with him the procedure of shopping, which he so disliked. His pockets were full of five-guilder notes (it need hardly be said that he never had a wallet) mixed up with thousand-guilder notes that were very similar in colour, and I remember his sincere astonishment when he found another of the latter in one of his side pockets. And how many lost prizes there were, how many passports left in hotels, or simply forgotten somewhere. He looked askance at me, when in the hotel in Taxco I told him off for paying \$70 for a three-minute telephone call to New York. It is doubtful whether it had got through to him that in certain countries, and especially from hotels, one should avoid telephone calls. Beliavsky told me that, when he scolded Misha for giving to the Sports Committee almost all of his prize of several thousand dollars for winning the World Blitz Championship in Saint John, Misha simply replied: 'Well, they asked me for it and I gave it to them.'

Of course, he was not interested in titles and awards. I think that even the title of world champion did not greatly interest him. And he was not interested at all in the careerism, power or benefits (or what is understood by these words) of his fellow champions of later years. And, in contrast to them, it is altogether impossible to imagine him as a member of any party at all.

Although in later times he visited Israel, I think that Jewishness only interested him to a limited extent. I recall how, before one of the Olympiads, *Pravda* wrote: 'The team of the Soviet Union is represented by players of various nationalities: the Armenian Petrosian, the Russian Smyslov, the Estonian Keres, and Tal from Riga.'

He showed little interest in his health or his appearance, or in what others thought of him. He was as from another planet, and there was only one thing that really excited and interested him: chess.

He belonged to that rare category of people, who, as if it were something that went without saying, rejected everything to which the majority aim, and went through life with an easy step, a chosen one of fate, an adornment of the earth. In burning out his life, he knew that this was no dress rehearsal, and that there would not be another one. But he did not want to and could not live in any other way.

In January 1973 I played in the reserve master group in Wijk aan Zee, my first tournament after leaving Russia. Misha, who was playing in the main tournament, appeared every day in the general hall and, after studying my position, moved on to other games, and often also to games of the other groups, with an average rating of somewhere in the region of 1900... We often talked then until deep into the night and sometimes I would set off on foot from Wijk aan Zee to Beverwijk, where I was lodged just like most of the participants. The buses were no longer running, or, as it would be more correct to say, they had not yet started running. On the free day there was a big blitz tournament for all-comers, which lasted the whole day, and which Misha won. For the information of modern professionals: the first prize was one hundred guilders.

One of his favourite expressions was 'tasty chess'. And that was what he played. In his commentaries to his own games there was a predominance of good nature, respect for the opponent, and self-irony, which is so rarely encountered nowadays. He did not like writing his comments, but preferred to demonstrate the games, while the text was recorded on tape. In older times he simply used to dictate. This was how he met his wife Gelya in the autumn of 1970, when for some formal reason he was not allowed into the Championship of the Soviet Union, which was being held in his own city of Riga.

He always used to write his move in short notation, and always before executing it on the board. In rare instances, when his opponent became very curious and looked openly at his scoresheet, he would cover it with his pen. If he did not like the move, he would cross it out and write a new one. In his later years he used to say increasingly often: 'I even wrote the winning move on my scoresheet, but crossed it out at the last moment...'

Somewhere around an hour and a half to two hours before a game he would eat something, but more for appearances' sake, then speak little and disappear into his own private world. That, for example, is what happened during his match with Kortchnoi, and I realised that at such moments it was better not to disturb him. We ate in various places – this was a long time before the matches where everything was regulated to the nearest minute and calorie. It goes without saying that he adored everything that was bad for him: spicy, salty, peppery. Misha always smoked heavily, normally 2-3 packets a day – he preferred Kent – but when he was playing a further two could be added.

The last time I saw him was in Tilburg in the autumn of 1991. Misha had travelled from Germany, where he had latterly been living with his

wife and his daughter Zhanna, whom he loved very much. He looked terrible, much older than his age, but he was still the same Misha. Replying to a greeting by one of his acquaintances, he said 'Thank you. Thank you for recognising me.' He would usually sit in the press centre with his eternal cigarette, saying little, but every remark he made on chess was always to the point. He livened up a little when in his customary manner he showed an audience at the Max Euwe Academy one of his latest games: against Panno from the tournament in Buenos Aires. The young people of the early nineties looked at him as if he were Staunton or Zukertort. It was a miracle not that he was alive, but that he did not die sooner.

He also played in the last USSR Championship, and later wrote a big article for *New In Chess* together with Vaganian, with whom he was especially close in his last years. In February 1992, when I was in Cannes, I was asked to phone him. 'Listen,' said Misha, 'I am reading now about matches for the world championship, which I myself saw from close to. It wasn't like that, it was all different. Come and see me, and we'll write something together.' I promised. But for various reasons it kept getting put off and put off...

Misha played his last tournament in Barcelona. There were some young and promising players. He used to joke in his time about those that showed promise: 'At their age I was already an ex-World Champion...' For half the tournament he was really ill, with a temperature. In the last game, assuming that it would be a quick draw, he played 3.Bb5 in the Sicilian, offered a draw, and received a refusal. In a lost position, already under attack, his young opponent himself offered a draw. This was the last tournament game won by Misha.

We spoke by telephone quite often, and a couple of days before my departure to the Olympiad in Manila 1992 I received a letter from him. Here it is:

'Dear Genna!

Unfortunately, I have not finished the promised account of the tournament — I have been feeling very unwell. On Monday I am flying to Moscow for another appointment with the doctors. There will most probably be an operation. All the same, there will be plenty of free time as well as writing materials... In any case, I wish every success to you and all your least Russified (let's put it that way) team.

With warmest greetings. Misha.'

This was the last greeting that I received from him. Before going into hospital he played in a blitz-tournament in Moscow, where he won against

Kasparov and took third place behind Kasparov and Bareev, but ahead of Smyslov, Dolmatov, Vyzhmanavin and Beliavsky. A few days later, on 28th June 1992, Misha Tal died in hospital in Moscow. The official cause of his death was given as a haemorrhage in the oesophagus, but effectively his entire organism had ceased to function. He was buried in Riga, the city where he was born, in a Jewish cemetery alongside the graves of his relatives. He was 55 years old.

In his last years he looked older than his age, but I never associated him with being an old man – he always remained Misha.

Once I asked myself: 'Where do these boys from decent European Jewish families, Modigliani, Kafka, Tal, who are even similar in appearance, where do they get their all-absorbing passion for self-expression from? Where is the secret here?' This I do not know.

A few years before his death, Wilhelm Steinitz said: 'I am not a chess historian, I am a piece of chess history, which no one can ignore.' Anyone who has ever been or will be concerned with the amazing world of chess, will not ignore the illustrious name of Misha Tal.

# A Journey to Immortality

Mikhail Botvinnik

I played my only game with Botvinnik in the spring of 1989. He was in Holland to buy a new, stronger computer that he needed for his work, and I was with him all the time. On one of the days Botvinnik was asked to make an appearance at the Closing Ceremony of the Dutch Junior Championship in Hilversum. There were, of course, both photographers and television cameras. At some point the director of the television broadcast asked: 'If Mr Botvinnik has no objection, we would like to film him during a game.'

'Well, but I haven't played for a long time.'

I urged him: 'They are very insistent, Mikhail Moiseevich. You yourself know television; they won't leave you in peace.'

'Well, if that's the case...'

We set up the pieces. I got White. 'Let's go, let's go', the director ordered. I decided not to try anything original and advanced my queen's pawn. There was a whirring of the TV camera, and somewhere the voices of children. Botvinnik did not reply for some time and I looked enquiringly at him. His entire appearance had changed. He had drawn himself erect and stiffened on his chair. Finally, looking at the board, he adjusted his glasses and his tie, and made his reply. Unfortunately, neither then, in the bustle of the moment, nor later, in the drag of daily life, did I record the game, although I remember its course very well. He played the Dutch, an old-fashioned Stonewall with the bishop at e7.

I made all the well-known moves and Botvinnik replied unhurriedly, always stopping to think. But after about fifteen moves for some strange reason my position had lost its flexibility, the general plan had been lost. I stood rather worse.

'Is that enough?' I asked the director.

'More than enough'.

Botvinnik was thinking over his move.

'Mikhail Moiseevich, he says that he has taken enough film.'

Botvinnik continued looking at the board. Finally he raised his head. Not blinking, he looked harshly at me with his blue, already discoloured eyes, with their astigmatically arranged pupils, which had also looked into the eyes of Lasker, Capablanca and Alekhine, and he knew well the evaluation of the position on the board – and he knew that I also knew.

'He says, Mikhail Moiseevich, that it has all turned out well.'

Something melted in his face, and turning to the director, he said with a slight bow in perfect Dutch: 'Alstublieft meneer. Tot uw dienst.'<sup>1</sup>

As a frequent visitor to Holland, the first time in 1938, he knew a few expressions in Dutch, although both his English and his German were rather poor.

I made the acquaintance of Mikhail Moiseevich Botvinnik in the spring of 1988, when he came at the invitation of Bessel Kok to one of the first SWIFT tournaments in Brussels. Henceforth we met regularly during his frequent visits to Amsterdam or Brussels. Or in Moscow, the last time during the Olympiad in December 1994, six months before his death. I now regret that I did not have the foresight of an Eckermann and did not write down all my conversations with Botvinnik, but much is still fresh in my memory and, fortunately, I recorded a good deal on tape.

On one of his first visits to Amsterdam, when he was a guest at someone's house, a woman, a Muscovite, already somewhere in her mid-40s, on seeing before her the living Botvinnik, introduced herself in her confusion as 'Olya'. 'Well, if you are Olya, then I am Misha', Botvinnik replied, striking the same note. A few minutes later I said jokingly to him: 'Well, Misha, time to go, it's getting late.'

The following day he presented me with one of his books, with an inscription made with a shaky but clear hand: 'To Genna Sosonko on his birthday, from Misha Botvinnik, Amsterdam 18.5.1989'.

That is how we addressed each other for a few days, but the joke did not grow into a habit and we soon reverted to Mikhail Moiseevich and Gennady Borisovich. Only on a few occasions did he return to Genna, when he wanted to say something confidential or special. I used to call him 'Misha' when parting, and when I tried, always unsuccessfully, to remove the coating of many Soviet decades, or to get behind his established concepts, to get something...

When saying good-bye to him during his last visit to Tilburg in September 1994 something faltered in the old man, in his intonation, in his eyes. After the usual words, I said, bending down very close: 'Misha, you must hold on, hold on', and then almost tactlessly: 'Well, I don't know when we will see each other again', striking a philosophical chord. He interrupted with a severe 'What do you mean? You, Genna, can perhaps come to Moscow...'

'Alright', I said. 'Maybe you're right. Once again, all the best.'

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1 'My pleasure, sir. At your service.'

In 1988 I spent ten days in a row with him, when I went to Moscow with the young Jeroen Piket for some training sessions with the Patriarch. I still can see the grandmaster room in the Central Chess Club on Gogol Boulevard, fifteen-year-old Alexey Shirov with his trainer Vladimir Bagirov, who also attended the lessons, and Mikhail Moiseevich himself, who always thought a little before asking a question or making a comment. One thing that sticks in my memory was the essential rule, for some reason formulated by him almost religiously, to make the first fifteen moves in a game within half an hour, in order to avoid time trouble. A rule which for a reason unknown to me he always referred to as 'the Chinese rule'.

I also remember his 'Stop' during analysis, and a question to Piket: 'I have the impression that you do not know my game with Yuriev from the Championship of the Union of Metalworkers of 1927?'

I objected: 'But, Mikhail Moiseevich, how on earth could Jeroen know your game with Yuriev from the Championship of the Union of Metalworkers of 1927?'

'No, you ask him nevertheless, translate...'

It was there that I realised that his single-minded manner of thinking, which did not know any doubts and was in many respects dogmatic, together with his very high class, was ideal for lessons with young players. And as a teacher he was, of course, excellent. It was a hot July month, and in a neighbouring room, playing endless training games, was a very small, thin lad, to whom Botvinnik advised that we pay particular attention. His name was Volodya Kramnik.

On his last visit to Holland, where he gave a lecture to students at the Economics Faculty in Tilburg, we had lengthy talks, and not only about chess. I would even say not so much about chess, as about his parents, his wife, books and music, Stalin and Molotov, always nevertheless returning to chess. He spoke in a precise, concise language, often banal in its simplicity, slightly guttural, and of course, with his own Botvinnik interpretation and way of seeing events and facts.

'My father came from Belarus from the village of Kudrishchino, which is twenty-five kilometres from Minsk, not far from the little town of Ostroshitsky. His father, my grandfather, was a tenant farmer. In general it was rare for a Jew to work in agriculture, but that's how it was. All his sons, and he had five, including my father, worked for him. My father was born in 1878. He possessed enormous physical strength – he would seize by the horns a bull out of a herd and throw it onto the ground. He had a

severe character and if something seemed just to him, he would stand up for it to the end. Yes, probably... Probably both my constitution and my character traits come from him. He spoke Russian without any accent and he wrote very well. I remember that he had beautiful handwriting. Of course, he also spoke Yiddish. I don't know if he went to a Jewish school, but at home we were forbidden to talk in Yiddish, only in Russian. At the age of twenty-five he left for Minsk, then the Revolution of 1905 began, and he worked in an underground press. There, on account of poisoning, he lost his teeth, and he decided to become a dental mechanic.

'Two of his brothers left for America back in the last century, and his sister Raisa, my aunt, also went there. But she left later, in 1914. I remember how she came to say good-bye to us in St Petersburg. I was very small, and I was standing up in my cot, waving a wooden sabre. And I hit my aunt Raisa on the head with it when she came up to me. After my victory in Nottingham she sent me a congratulatory postcard from America. I, of course, did not reply, at that time this was terribly dangerous. It was no accident that she sent the congratulations not in a letter, but on a postcard, so that everyone could see that there were no secrets.

'My father, however, travelled to Berlin to study with a dental mechanic, but he did not like the German, and so he came to St Petersburg. He became a pupil to the dental mechanic Vasily Efremov. I saw him at my father's funeral, a small man, with an enormous grey beard. My father studied with him and received his diploma and the right to live in St Petersburg. At first he rented a flat on Pushkin Street, and there he met my mother Serafima Samoilovna Rabinovich. She was a dentist. She also had a very interesting life.

'My mother was two years older than my father. She originated from Kreslavka, Vitebsk Province, in Belarus. My grandfather on my mother's side was a private *chargé d'affaires* for Baron Klyapel. He had a large house on the banks of the Dvina. I remember this house from a photograph, it was burnt down during the war. My mother told me that when the oldest son of my grandfather Isaac, in honour of whom my older brother, who was killed in the war, was named, arrived in Kreslavka, they would spend all night long playing chess, but at what standard they played is not known. Then in Dvinsk my mother received her dentist's diploma. She also participated in the 1905 Revolution, and was even in the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, but she belonged to the Mensheviks. Then she came to St Petersburg and worked in the dispensary at the Obukhov factory. At the time a little steam train used to run there from the

Nikolayev Station. I remember it very well. She used to travel on it and place orders with the dental mechanic on Pushkin Street. That was how she met my father. They got married, she left the factory and went to live at his place. It was there that my elder brother Isaac was born.

'My father was a very good mechanic, things took a turn for the better, and we moved to the Nevsky Prospekt, where we lived in the courtyard of block 88. We had a large, sunny flat of seven rooms on the third floor. There was a lift, and on the ground floor there was a door-keeper. There was a cook, and a maid, and one time my brother and I even had a nursery governess. Then came 1917, the February Revolution. I was six years old and I remember it very well. When there was shooting on the street mother would put us behind a wardrobe. We were, after all, living on the Nevsky in the very centre of the city.

'In 1920 my father was attracted by another woman and he left us. He got married to a noblewoman. He had another family, two daughters. With one of them, who is ten years younger than me, I now have close relations.

'I was taught chess by my friend Lyonya Baskin. I was twelve years old. He lived in the next courtyard of the same block on the Nevsky. The parents of this Lyonya had a small grocery shop also on the Nevsky. Do you remember that block where the Khronika cinema is now? Altogether I have been only twice to a synagogue. The first time was with Lyonya and his parents. There was some Jewish festival and they took me with them. On Troitsky Street there was a large choral synagogue, but I didn't like it there. In general, although I saw my maternal grandfather wearing a skull-cap, my father and mother were internationalists. The second time was in 1964 after the Olympiad in Israel, when we had an excursion to Jerusalem. I made an appearance at a kibbutz not far from the Lebanese border. There I was asked about my Jewishness. I replied: 'My situation is complicated, because by blood I am Jewish, by culture Russian, and by education Soviet.' There were no further questions.

'Among the people, you know, in the 20s and 30s there was no anti-Semitism. This came later, from above. Well, of course, there was a veiled intrigue when I played against Smyslov, Jew against Russian. There were no anti-Semitic exclamations from the audience – my hearing is very good, but there were telephone calls, especially during the return match, and there was anti-Semitic abuse. That did happen. Of course, I phoned the militia from the neighbour's, and the calls ceased.

'In general, after 1920 we were very poor, my mother was ill, and my father gave us 120 roubles a month, which was a very, very modest amount. No, my father and mother no longer saw each other, although they maintained relations. My mother was frequently ill and when she was in hospital my brother did the housework. When I became a student in 1928, he used to give me a rouble a day for travelling to the institute, dinner and supper. I went to school on Finnish Lane by the Finland Station and I walked there along Liteiny Prospekt right across the city. There were some excellent teachers and I owe much to the school.

'At the age of nine I read nearly all of the Russian literature, the classics. Books were very cheap. I read Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol and Turgenev, and later Tolstoy. *War and Peace*, Tolstoy put everything into this, but *Anna Karenina* and the rest are weaker. But above them all is Pushkin, of course. I don't know when he will be surpassed, if ever. After all, he was so full of life, so optimistic, and so laconic. He never wrote anything uninteresting or verbose, whereas other writers did.

'Of the modern writers I liked Zoshchenko. I met him in 1933, when he came to the last round of the USSR Championship. He looked very sad. He said something surprising to me: 'You will achieve a great deal, and not only in chess.' He took a liking to me. I also rate Yevgeny Schwartz very highly. Have I read Solzhenitsyn? I read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and took a dislike to him. *Ivan Denisovich* is plagiarism. He has taken it all from Tolstoy, from *War and Peace*. It is Platon Karataev, transferred to modern times. It is cleverly written, of course, but you also have to give some content, while *Matryona's Home* is an appeal to the reactionary peasant past of Russia. I haven't read anything more of him – everything was clear to me.

'As for music, here two factors played a part. Firstly, music lessons at school, and secondly my wife. At school there were no singing lessons, such as there are now. There were lessons of listening to music, and either the teacher herself played or else she invited students from the Conservatory. We learned to listen to and to understand music. Therefore I know Russian and international music quite well. Gayane Davidovna and I used to go to the opera, although rarely, and much more often to the ballet.

'I met my wife on 2nd May 1934. I remember that day very well. My wife's maiden name was Ananova. She was one hundred per cent Armenian, but was born in St Petersburg. She was three years younger than me. Her father was from the Rostov Region, and her mother was from Eisk. In the family they spoke only Russian, although, when the parents wanted the

children not to understand, they spoke to each other in Armenian. She was amazingly friendly, kind, and very religious. This faith was a great support to her. Slava Ragozin remarked about her: 'Gannochka is an obliging person.' Capablanca said about her: 'Et bonne et belle.' Part of my success belongs to her, of course. In everything that I did, she supported me. By profession she was a ballerina; she studied with the famous Vaganova. She danced first in the Mariinsky, the Kirov Theatre, then after the war in the Bolshoy. In total she was a dancer for twenty-four years, right up to 1956. In the Bolshoy she performed in figure dances, but also sometimes in individual parts, for example, in the Gypsy Dance in *La Traviata* or in *Gayane*, where she danced in a four. She had a phenomenal memory. After all, there were no videos, but she remembered nearly all the productions. I always went, of course, when she was dancing. Well, then a daughter, grand-children, great grand-children – she devoted all her life to them, and she also looked after my mother. Now my great grand-daughter Mashenka, she is five, is very much like her, just as friendly and likeable, and she calls me grandad Mish! And sociable too, whereas Gayane Davidovna was always a little sad...

'Talking about music, I remember how in the Autumn of 1934 I heard Kozlovsky in *Yevgeny Onegin*. He was a fantastic singer, with a brilliant voice, and I rate him higher than the Italians. The following year I heard him in *Rigoletto*. At that time I often went to the theatre. Leningrad was simply staggered by my successes, and I had a free pass to the directors' box in all the theatres.

'No, I didn't know Shostakovich, but I was friendly with Sergey Sergeevich Prokofiev. And also with the conductor Khaikin. We were both elected deputies to the Leningrad City Council, and it was incredibly tedious, so we sat next to each other and chatted about this and that. Later I also used to see him in Moscow. I met Prokofiev in Moscow during the third International Tournament. He liked chess very much. He played himself and he was a friend of Capablanca. I was then half a point behind Capa, after losing to him in a completely won position. Do you remember this game?... I was playing very well. And then at the end of the tournament I had Black against Levenfish, whereas Capa had White against Eliskases. Levenfish spread a provocative rumour, that he was being forced to lose to me, and he informed Capablanca of this. Prokofiev also heard about this. He was a hot-tempered person, and he severed all relations with me. Capa won easily against Eliskases, while I gained an advantage in the Dragon and even won a pawn, but because of the opposite-coloured bishops it ended

in a draw. Prokofiev understood everything, and when Capa and I shared first place in Nottingham, he sent congratulatory telegrams to us both. Then we were friends, but in the 1940 Championship he nevertheless supported Keres, and not me.

'Do I like his music? I remember back in school his piece *Despair* being played, and I liked it very much. When he died, I was asked to write about him. The musical experts were very surprised, since they had never heard of this piece. This is a very strong work, but in general his music was somehow artificial. In his memoirs he states that you must write music in a way that has not been done before you. But what did Capa teach? That you should always play by position. But, of course, Prokofiev has some very strong works. Now Shostakovich is somehow closer to me, his music is more lively, mischievous.

'Was Prokofiev a strong player? No, the King's Gambit, sacrifices, everything forward, and so Oistrakh easily won against him when they played a match in 1937. Oistrakh had a waiting style, the main thing was not to make any mistakes. He and I were also very friendly. But in general I prefer the piano. There you can express more.

'Did I record my very first games? Yes, of course, in that little notebook which I think is now with Baturinsky. I also recorded some simultaneous games by Lasker, and the games from the second championship of my school, where I took first place. All the games are recorded, with notes to nearly all of them.

'My parents were categorically against me playing chess. I remember walking with my father along Vladimir Prospekt past the gambling club, where on the top floor the Petrograd Chess Assembly occupied two rooms, and saying to him: 'Daddy, look, that's where I play.' He was very opposed to the fact that I played chess. He was terribly worried that I would pass through all the rooms of this gambling den. He thought that it would drag me down, but gambling did not interest me at all. I was aiming for the top floor, where I could play chess.

'Even when successes came and my name appeared in the papers, there was no great enthusiasm. When in 1926 I needed to travel for the first time to play in Stockholm, my mother rushed to the school and spoke to the teacher of our class. And he said ironically to her: 'In order to see the world at such an age, one can even miss ten days in school.' Even before this, she secretly complained to the director of the school about my fascination. He said to her: 'Your son is a bookworm, leave him in peace.' Later, of course, they reconciled themselves to it. They had been against it

for the reason that chess was not a profession. But I, I could not avoid playing...

'The following year, in a non-category tournament, I already played well. No, I didn't have any trainer, I learned everything from books and I analysed a lot myself. At that time everyone in Leningrad was a pupil of Romanovsky, but I did not go to that club, for which Romanovsky hated me. In general, relations with him were difficult, but of course outwardly this did not show. We greeted each other, and observed all the normal decencies.

'The first with whom I severed all contact was Bronstein, after our match – he behaved outrageously. In the auditorium, directly opposite the stage, was the box of the KGB, where all his supporters from his Dinamo club were sitting. So when he sacrificed something or won a pawn, they all applauded. He would make a move and quickly go behind the stage, then he would suddenly dart out and disappear again. In the auditorium there was laughter, and this hindered my playing. And regarding the fact that he claimed that during the 23rd game he was thinking more about the fate of his father, he was prompted to say this by Weinstein, his evil genius. Weinstein was a dreadful man, simply dreadful. He hated me, and he did not want me to become World Champion. When my match with Alekhine was being discussed he used his position as head of the financial planning department of the KGB, despite Stalin's decision. He used all his connections to hinder my discussions with Alekhine. During the war he campaigned for Alekhine to be declared a criminal and for him to be deprived of his title of World Champion. He put pressure on me to be the initiator of this. Clearly this was the simplest, that Alekhine would altogether not play the match. After my match with Bronstein, although he and I continued to say hello, he ceased to exist for me. During the last few years I have begun to relate normally to him, but he still hates me.

'With Levenfish too I had difficult relations. In general he was a very intelligent man; before the Revolution he studied at a Technological Institute in Petersburg. As a chess player he was very talented, but he did not devote all his time to chess, although he possessed a great knowledge of the game. He was always a lone wolf. In 1917 he was already grown up, and I was still a child, but no, I don't think, as you say, that we perceived in different ways what was happening. I do not think that he was anti-Soviet. In the end he did not live so badly in the Soviet Union. As for the fact that he could not travel abroad, I am not sure that it was so important. Likewise, I remember that I talked to Gulko and his wife when they applied for a visa

in 1979, and I told them that I could also have remained in Stockholm in 1926, but that I didn't, and that it did not turn out badly.

'Romanovsky was not anti-Soviet either. Whereas Bogatyrchuk hated Soviet power. No, I have not read his book, but I know him well. He was talented. He understood positions well, calculated well, and used Lasker's principle: if you stand worse, you are not yet lost. But as a person he was unscrupulous. I lost a game to him in 1927, and later two more, but what can you do? There was a forestry worker in Siberia called Izmailov, and I also lost two games against him, one in Odessa in 1929, and the other in the semi-final in 1931, so that I only just got into the final.

'Well, with Petrosian I also had no relations after he had behaved quite improperly during our match. We had to sign the regulations for the match and he did not like some trifling point, I don't remember which, and he would not sign. I said, very well, I'll phone Rogard<sup>1</sup>. They told me in the Federation to wait a couple of days. Petrosian agreed. Then he again raised his objections. And this occurred several times. It was clear that they had decided to fray my nerves. When Petrosian climbed the stairs of the Estrada Theatre, the Armenians in front of him scattered sacred earth from Echmiadzin. Well, what a way to go on... But he regarded this as being right and proper. If in front of me they had scattered sacred earth from Jerusalem, what would I have done? Sweep it up, and I can walk on, I would have said.

'With Smyslov I also had strained relations, but nothing comparable. Now Vasily Vasilievich and I get on normally. With Euwe too there were strained relations, when we were rivals, for example, in Groningen in 1946, when it was clear that, if he were to win this tournament, there would be no match-tournament in 1948. But later, when the competitive element was no longer there, we were the best of friends.

'With Karpov I got on well, but we fell out when he started asserting that there was no such thing as the Soviet School of Chess. And later, when he began oppressing Kasparov, I took Kasparov's side, since I considered that they should be in equal conditions. And this terrible episode when their match was terminated. Here everyone took part – the Central Committee, the Sports Committee, the Federation, and Campo.

'From 1973 to 1978 Garry attended my school. When it was closed, the two of us simply kept meeting. I did everything I could to support him. I arranged his participation in the Sokolsky Memorial, where he won easily

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1 Folke Rogard (1899-1973) President of FIDE 1949-1970.

and became a master. I did the same for the tournament in Banja Luka, where he became a grandmaster.

'Garry now plays worse than he did ten years ago and his style has changed. He used to play like Capablanca, as I taught him, by position, but a few years ago I noticed that in the interest of safety he was going in for simplifications, and after the position had been simplified, he would employ his tactical talent. No, I don't think that it is a matter of age, he has simply realised that his first aim should be not to lose. You know that every tenor can hit a certain number of high C's in his career. Perhaps also in chess a player can play only a certain number of good games, and for the rest of the time he simply moves the pieces. I think the only thing that can save him as a chess player is to give up all this rubbish that he is now occupied with. But I am used to people turning their backs on me. In the end I helped Kasparov not because of his personal qualities, but because he is such a wonderful player.

'Who do I rate more highly, Kasparov or Karpov? Of course, they are both outstanding talents, but the one with the more versatile talent is Karpov. Have you seen my book *Anatoly Karpov: His Road to the World Championship*? He played fantastically in these matches. How he won against Spassky! Spassky was still very strong. A few months before their match he had won the 1973 USSR Championship. And what a Championship! Nevertheless in their match Karpov simply crushed him. But then Karpov stopped playing at full strength. Why? I don't know. Perhaps in the money-chess combination, money became more important. But what he showed recently at the tournament in Linares indicates that he has retained his talent.

'With whom would I like to remain on a desert island, Karpov or Kasparov? I would say this: I now have quite good relations with Karpov. But if I had to choose between Karpov the champion and Kasparov the champion, I would prefer to remain alone on this desert island.

What about the young? I remember, when Kramnik was twelve, he played very cautiously, very correctly. He very quickly grew stronger and he now plays more boldly, but he simply shows a lack of respect for himself. He is fat, he drinks and he smokes. He lost shamefully to Kamsky, and also to Gelfand. And now he avoids me, goes the other way.

'Shirov is an original talent, in some ways he reminds me of Kortchnoi. But, I think, his nervous system is not in order. With him things are first good, and then bad. He is sharp and impulsive, and he is capable of criticising anyone. No, I don't see him as a World Champion. Before we talk about a future champion, order has to be restored in the chess world.

All these rapid-play tournaments. Everything is bash, bash, it's a mockery of chess. Did you see how Kasparov lost to a computer? An insipid game! The computer played insipidly, but Kasparov was simply dreadful. But I understood this even before the match in London. When I was speaking to his mother I realised that for them money was everything.

'No, chess has not changed, it has not become different. This is all fairy-tales, for young children. It is only that the initial information is now easier to obtain, but the process of analysis has remained the same. A chess player should himself analyse, and a lot, and nothing can replace analysis.

The best of my analytical works? I think that I wrote it during the war, when I annotated all the games from the tournament for the title of Absolute USSR champion. In 1943 I wrote to Molotov that I was losing my chess strength. And so he drew up a resolution: 'Comrade Botvinnik must without fail retain his chess capabilities and must be given the time necessary for further improvement.' That was how I was given two free days a week, which was when I wrote the book. I remember Bykhovsky bringing Beliavsky to me when he was seventeen to ask my opinion on his play. It was evident that he was talented, but he knew nothing, and he simply played slap-dash. Therefore I gave him this book, so that he should learn to analyse. A few months later he returned it and said that he had looked for at least one mistake in the analyses, but had failed to find one.

'When was my play at its strongest? Well, of course, in 1948 I played well. I prepared with all my heart and I showed what I was capable of. And in the USSR Championship of 1945 I played well, when I scored 16 out of 18. Yes, and in the return match with Tal, although by then I was already fifty. I prepared very well, and surprised everyone, including Tal. You wrote a nice article about Tal, but you defined his style incorrectly. In our second match I showed how to play against him. When his pieces were leaping about the board, he had no equals, but when there was a solid pawn structure in the centre, then positionally he was weak. He had to be restricted, restricted. Yes, Tal... I remember that in Munich in 1958 there was a tram stop Talstrasse. We all joked that it had been named in Misha's honour. He was ill, you say? But he was ill all his life. And what in fact happened? Romanov<sup>1</sup> called me to say that the match was to be postponed – Tal was ill. Is there an official doctor's statement? What doctor's statement? He says, he is ill. 'But there is a rule,' I said, 'there must be a certifi-

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1 N. Romanov – Chairman of the Sports Committee of the Soviet Union at the time.

cate.' We began shouting at each other. In the evening Romanov phoned me to say that the match was on. He had called Tal in Riga, to say that he should be officially examined, and Tal had refused.

'In general, after their matches with me, Bronstein, Smyslov and Tal no longer showed their former strength. I am to blame for this, since it was I who unclosed them, and then everyone understood how to play against them.

'No, I have never smoked, with the exception of two months in my youth, and I have not taken alcohol. I used to eat one and a half hours before a game, then I would lie down, but not sleep, simply lie down, because when you are lying down, no one bothers you with idle conversation. At first I used to take black currant juice with lemon with me to a game. My wife herself used to squeeze it, then I took to drinking coffee. At one time I used to eat chocolate during play. Not a bad idea, I think. For myself I noticed the following: if I put on weight during a tournament, it meant that I had played badly, and if I came back after a game not feeling tired, that was also bad. But if I was exhausted, then everything was in order. After my game with Capablanca in Amsterdam 1938 I couldn't get up from my chair.

'Sleep, of course, is important. What did Spassky say to you regarding sleep? Rubbish, most probably. But he was a great player, great! He was a continuation of Lasker's line. It was of little interest to him what others were doing, he had his own opinion. In his first match with Petrosian he played very well, but I think that Bondarevsky misled him. In the second match with Petrosian he was simply splendid. I think that he lost to Fischer through stupidity. He overrated himself. And what happened to him afterwards... You know that creativity and money accompany each other. The question is: which is more important? Either money in order to play chess, or chess in order to earn money. Well, he switched to the second system and lost interest in chess. And it was lucky for him that he played that idiotic second match with Fischer in Yugoslavia and secured himself financially.

'So, about sleep. I always used to sleep very well up to the time of the third Moscow tournament of 1936. It was terribly hot, there was a constant noise on the street, and I was unable to sleep. But I was young and despite my insomnia I played well. I forced myself to play. Then my sleep was somehow restored, but not completely.

'Without any doubt one day a machine will play stronger than any human, and there is nothing here to fear. Chess will become more popular. After all, people run in stadia, although the bicycle and especially the car

are much quicker. No, here there is no need to fear, but writing such a program is not a simple matter. Do you know what I realised yesterday at the lecture? That to write a program for managing the economy is easier than for chess, because chess is a two-sided game, antagonistic. The players hinder each other, and the devil knows what that means, whereas in economics this is not the case, and everything is simpler.

'No, I never saw Stalin. I talked on the telephone with Poskryobyshev, his assistant, but I never saw Stalin. But I have a telegram. I received it in January 1939 after I had sent Molotov a letter regarding my match with Alekhine. The telegram read: 'If you decide to challenge Alekhine the chess player to a match, we wish you complete success. The rest is not difficult to ensure. Molotov.' I always thought that Molotov had written it, but once I read it with a Caucasian accent and I realised that it was Stalin's style, especially 'The rest is not difficult to ensure'. Then I have hanging on the wall in the chess centre a 1950 decree with Stalin's signature. Stalin, after all, was not only a negative figure, he played a dual role. He strengthened the state, and although people lived in poverty, the majority supported him.

'Tens of millions of lives, do you say? You know, I do not really believe this. There were camps, of course, but many returned from the camps, very many, including some of my friends. I do not really believe these figures. Although Stalin very skilfully camouflaged his evil deeds. The first time I sensed that he was a liar was in 1952, when the trial of the doctor-murderers was announced. I also remember a reception at Vyshinsky's<sup>1</sup>. Even before the war I had championed the idea that chess tournaments should be conducted like musical competitions, that chess was not inferior to the violin. Vyshinsky said that there was no money. So I asked him if there was money for music competitions? He made no reply... Vyshinsky adapted himself to circumstances, but he was a capable person. In what sense? He was a good lawyer, talented, but unprincipled. With Krylenko, it was a different matter. He was kind, just, principled and he loved chess madly, but, of course, Party discipline and directions of the Central Committee were the law for him.

'I saw Khrushchev once at an exhibition. He had an enormous stomach, and the photographers were shouting to him: 'A photograph, Nikita Sergeevich.' And he says: 'Whereabouts?' Here Brezhnev, who was with him, got down on the ground, offered his knee, and Khrushchev sat down on it. And there they were on the photograph together. In 1961 Brezhnev

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<sup>1</sup> A. Vyshinsky (1883-1954) Soviet General Prosecutor at that time.

presented me with a decoration after the return match with Tal. He spoke very warmly, and in general I must say that I liked him. It was only later, when he became ill, that things went wrong with him...

'Do I have regrets about anything that I did not do right in my life? I made some mistakes, but did not repeat them. Which? Well, it is difficult to say... Sometimes in small matters I made stupid decisions, but this taught me, and so in general, no, I have no regrets.'

He fell silent, the room was filled with the setting sun of a September day in 1994, and at the nearby church it was already striking six. It was evident that he was tired.

'Can you see me, Mikhail Moiseevich?' I asked.

'Only your outline.'

'Haven't you been to see Fyodorov? Smyslov, for instance said...'

'Come on, Vasily Vasilievich's sight is three times better than mine.'

On his previous visit he had nevertheless mentioned that he might see the famous ophthalmologist, but had kept on waiting, thinking that the professor should first read an article he wrote back in 1954, which had just appeared in a historical journal. An article from which it was clear that already then he was in favour of democracy.

'I've been to see Fyodorov. He told me directly that my cells are ageing.'

'Does that mean that medicine can't do anything?'

'That's right. True, he offered to do an operation, but I declined.'

I looked again at him. His senile hands, the astigmatic look from behind the thick glass of his spectacles, the white, neatly combed hair. He spoke about people, the majority of whom were dead, as if he, in his ninth decade, was not concerned by the concepts of time and age. His lecture to the economics faculty in Tilburg and a press conference devoted to chess showed essentially one and the same fervent, passionate attempt to assert his correctness, often sharp and impatient, disregarding the opinion of his companion or opponent. Very often he would take as the basis a fact that was by no means evident, and sometimes even highly dubious, and from this fact he would draw conclusions with iron consistency and merciless logic. At the lecture the faces of the students dropped when he said: 'As you yourselves know, the entire economy of Holland is determined by the three firms Philips, Hoogovens and Unilever.'

Having gained, as a result of his enormous talent and iron will, the highest successes in one field, he assumed that he could also feel at home in others, where he was considerably less competent. These judgements of-

ten looked naïve and banal, and sometimes even absurd. However, I have no doubt about his sincerity and his absolute belief in what he said. It is evident that part of the explanation was the country in which he spent his entire conscientious life, a country which held only one idea to be correct, and the rest to be reactionary or erroneous. His evaluations of people and events often combined into a deep penetration into the character of a person and a dogmatic obstinacy in explaining his motives and intentions. One has to give him his due: he developed his theories and hypotheses, based on these premises, with exceptional clarity and purposefulness. ‘Mikhail Moiseevich’s thinking’, Smyslov once said to me, ‘is strictly materialistic, I would even say machine-like. However, all is vanity, vanity of vanities, vanity and vexation of spirit, and Mikhail Moiseevich does not even have vexation of spirit.’ For this reason the following sentence, virtually unique among all that was written by Botvinnik, sounds unexpectedly moving: ‘In recent years I have understood what old age is. It is when your friends depart, new ones do not appear, and all that remains is to remember those who have departed.’

Having once taken a decision, he would follow it firmly, without diverging. I think that this quality, this belief in yourself and in the correctness of the chosen plan, of your own idea, is extremely important for a top-class chess player. In some way this confidence is transferred to the chess pieces. All the world champions who I have seen at close quarters have possessed this quality to some degree. After working out the variations and playing g2-g4, you have to believe only in the direct attack, and not in the fact that the f4 square is conceded for ever, and what will happen if a black knight reaches there. Doubts, which accumulate, alas, with experience, generate a lack of confidence and cause only harm.

Once, in a conversation, in order to see his reaction, I recalled what Napoleon had said: you must always leave yourself the right to laugh tomorrow at that of which you approve today. He replied: ‘Napoleon could also have told you something different. When did he say this, was it after 1812 perhaps?’

Those who had hurt his feelings, both in life, and at the chess board he remembered firmly. Once in Brussels, in the press centre at one of the GMA tournaments, discussing some opening position, I said to him that I thought this was an idea of Dzindzichashvili. ‘Dzindzichashvili, did you say? Well now, I remember. A man to disturb your dreams. At the Spartakiad (names the year and the month) I had a completely won posi-

tion, then I relaxed, allowed a tactical stroke, and did not even manage to draw...'

I can picture him well in the tournament press centre. He always analysed blind, in the last years almost literally. His grey head, bending low, sometimes rocking from side to side, as he asked: 'Where did you say the pawn was, at d5?'

The words of the Greek poet Archilochus: the fox knows many things, the hedgehog one big one – apply directly to him. In chess there were many splendid foxes in the 30s, 40s and 50s, but he, of course, belonged to the hedgehogs. About chess he knew something that others did not know.

In his final tournament at Leiden in 1970 he was close to a win in many games, but, after sharing last place for the first time in his life, he realised that it was not just a matter of chess. He understood perfectly well that in chess there applies that same cruel custom that existed for the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego: as the young grow up they kill and eat the old.

Remembering that in his time he had written both about Einstein and about Spinoza, I asked: 'Mikhail Moiseevich, you know, once Einstein received a telegram from a Brooklyn rabbi asking if it was true that he was atheist? The same day Einstein, also by telegraph, replied: I believe in the God of Spinoza, which manifests itself in the harmony of everything real, but not in a God that concerns itself with the fates and actions of people.'

He was silent for a while and began saying something about brute force, with which one cannot make progress in chess programs. He did not believe, either in the God of Spinoza, and even less so in the God of the Brooklyn rabbi, although without himself suspecting it, he lived by the wisdom of the Talmud: Life is not suffering and not pleasure, but a matter which must be carried through.

His religion became the philosophy of the young new state, together with which he had grown up. His creed became the slogans and ideals of this state. To these ideals, so beautiful on paper and unrealizable in practice, which have now been rejected together with the state itself, he has remained true, with some self-evident corrections, to the end. Rejecting them would have meant deleting his entire life. It was the same in chess: after developing his methods of preparation and his playing principles when he was still young, he remained true to them to the end of his career.

His great love during the last period of his life was his computer program. He devoted to it all his time and energy, and upheld it passionately. Once in a conversation he let slip: 'I have only one desire, to complete the work on my program, but death – I am not afraid of death.'

He knew, of course, that most mathematicians were sceptical about his idea of creating a program that would think like a human, but he firmly believed in his correctness.

He was a living relic, part of an epoch, and it is impossible to separate or examine him outside of this epoch or outside of its context. Just as it is impossible to understand certain actions of Shostakovich or Pasternak, for example, outside of those times in which they lived and outside of that amazing, cruel country, so different from any other. But there was also a difference. From the age of twenty, when he first became USSR Champion, his name became not simply popular, it became a symbol of chess in the country of the Soviets, just like the name of Mayakovsky in poetry, Ulanova in ballet, or Sholokhov in literature. Photographs and articles in newspapers, autographs and the admiring looks of fans, his direct links to the powers that be – all this, together with his innate qualities, character and talent made up the phenomenon of Mikhail Botvinnik.

I should like to recount two instances which I consider very typical of him. Like the majority of World Chess Champions, Botvinnik grew up without a father. From childhood he was trained to a formula, which became for him a formula for life. Which can be gleaned from the following. Botvinnik celebrated his 80th birthday, which coincided with the end of the 1991 Candidates Matches, in Brussels. There was a big banquet, and he himself made a speech. I translated it as best I could, and when, to the applause of those present, he began descending the staircase, even though he could see virtually nothing, I took him by the arm. 'No', he said firmly, 'I myself. I myself.' This was an unwillingness to submit, to be dependent on someone else, to stop the clocks, to resign. All that he did in chess and in life, all the decisions that he took, he took himself, and having taken them once he followed them unbendingly.

The other instance was in Tilburg, when he decided to buy several pens for his staff and asked me to help him. 'Only I definitely want them with black ink, Gennady Borisovich, definitely with black.' In the shop, when I said this to the assistant, she asked me to repeat it. Mikhail Moiseevich listened to our conversation, which of course was conducted in Dutch, and

then suddenly, pushing me aside, in order to clarify things once and for all, he determinedly said: 'Schwarz! Understand?'

The last time I saw him was in December 1994 in Moscow in the Central chess club on Gogol Boulevard, where he still worked every day. It was a typical snowy Moscow day, it was the birthday of one of his staff, there were tea and cakes, and it all seemed that it would be like that for ever, that nothing could happen to him, and that he would outlive us all. He, with his constant temperature of 35.7, as though conserved. It appeared that he was eternal. And indeed, he was strong physically. After receiving Muller's book as a present in childhood, he all his life followed his system of gymnastics. I remember how in Brussels, in 1988, on our very first acquaintance, in the hotel lift he asked: 'Can you do this?' and, supporting his hands on metal protuberances, he lifted his feet off the ground and made a right angle with his legs.

But then one day he fell ill, and was taken to hospital, which he positively disliked. The last time had been exactly fifty years earlier on account of appendicitis. Pleurisy was diagnosed. But his organism would not accept the gamma-globulin, and he got worse. But even in this condition he remained Botvinnik. He told the doctors which preparations were needed to neutralise the reaction. All the conditions in his organism began to develop and the ultimate cause of his death was cancer of the pancreas. He died bravely, realising perfectly well that he was dying, with a clear mind and a firm memory, his Botvinnik mind and his Botvinnik memory.

Vasily Smyslov remembered: 'I was with him at the Novodevichy Cemetery, when he said calmly: 'I will be here alongside Gannochka. There already is a place.' And he rubbed the place where the urn with his ashes now stands.' He was calm to the very end, deliberately accepting the formula of the ancients: it is easier for us to be patient, there, where it is not in our power to change anything. Few can say when they are dying: 'I lived in the way that I considered right.' I think that he could have said this.

He was at home surrounded by his loved ones, and with undiminished clarity of mind he gave the final directions about the morgue, the cremation, and stressed the pointlessness of splendid funerals.

In recent years Kasparov had quarrelled with his former teacher. They had different views on the future of chess, and on life in general. But how different they were, they were also similar in their implacability, in their be-

lief that only they were right. A few days after Botvinnik's death, Kasparov was playing in a tournament in Amsterdam. I ran into him an hour after the opening ceremony as he walked out of the hotel, animatedly discussing something with his second.

'Do you know, we have just now checked that it takes twenty minutes to get to the tournament hall.'

'But if you go this way, I think it will be shorter', I remarked.

'No, that street is very noisy.'

Mikhail Botvinnik, with his ideas of more than half a century's antiquity, through disagreements and arguments, years and death looked approvingly at his pupil.

His life contained the most important events of the twentieth century: both world wars, the ascent of man into space, and finally, the collapse of one of the most amazing states, of which he was the chess symbol.

'What are you intending, Genna, to talk with me about?' he asked, when I switched on the tape recorder.

'What do you mean, about life, about life.'

'Mm... but what is this for?'

Knowing that he did not like such definitions, I nevertheless replied: 'For immortality, Mikhail Moiseevich.'

'Eh, if you are intending to write memoirs, old chap, you should have said straight away...'

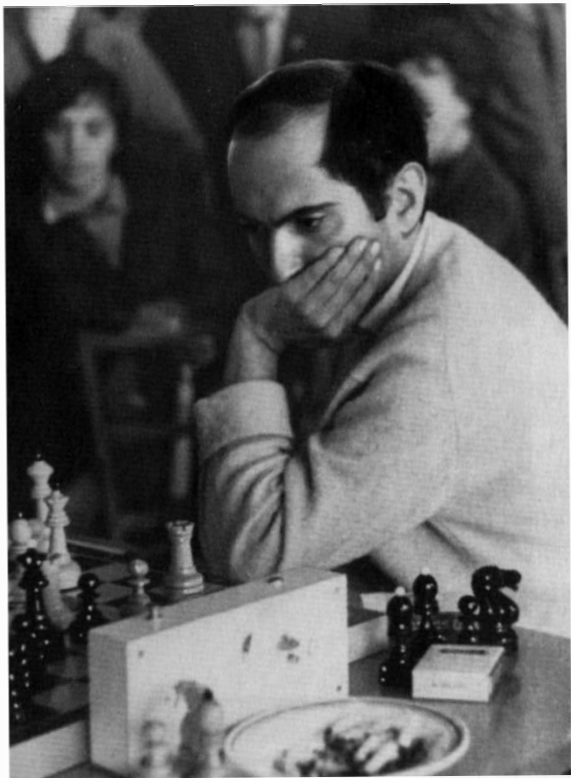
May 5th 1995 on the teletext – impossible, merciless words. And a call to Smyslov to have these words confirmed. A long pacing around the room with racing thoughts, that Troy is no longer, and then a slow realisation that it would be no longer possible to say to him, without hiding behind irony or a joke, what I had not had time to say. But a strange thing: within a few hours, when the initial pain had passed, and the soul, accustoming itself to anything, transfers he who lived into other dimensions and categories, and life continues without him, you begin to realise that there is considerable sense in the fact that the genuine presence of a person begins only after his death, just as an essential condition for immortality is death itself.

On May 5, 1995 Mikhail Moiseevich Botvinnik began his journey to immortality.



top: Tal honoured as World Champion after his victory over Botvinnik in 1960.

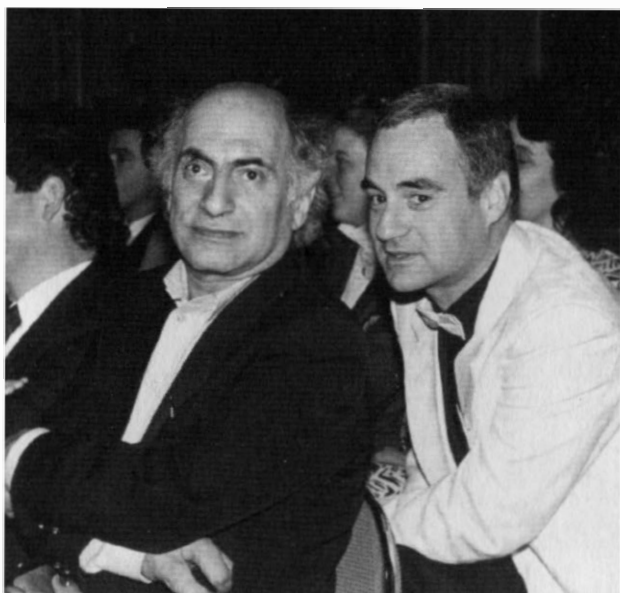
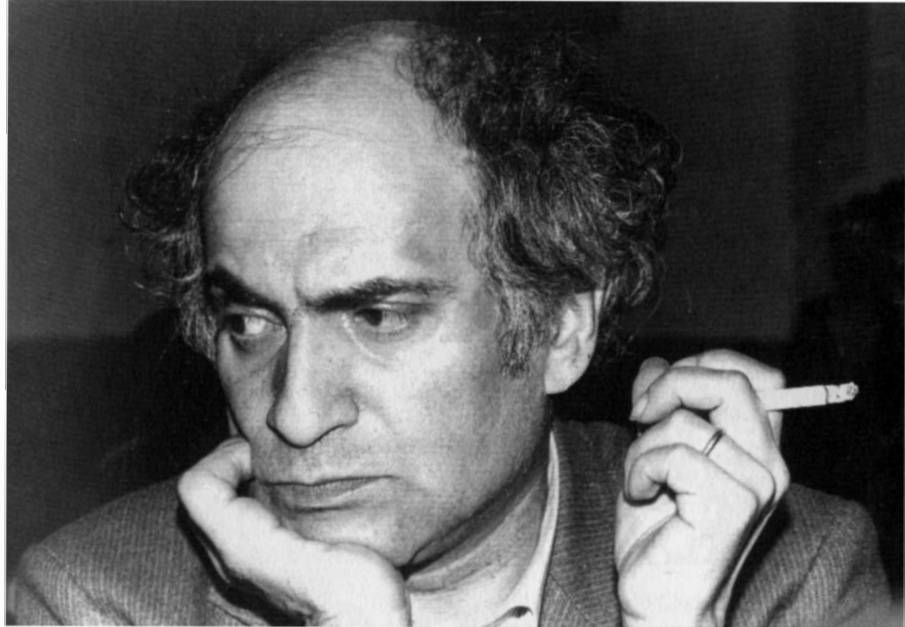
bottom: World Championship rematch Botvinnik vs Tal, Moscow 1961.



above: Tal in the '60s



left: Spassky playing in the 25th Soviet Championship in Riga 1n 1958, with Tal and Petrosian looking on.



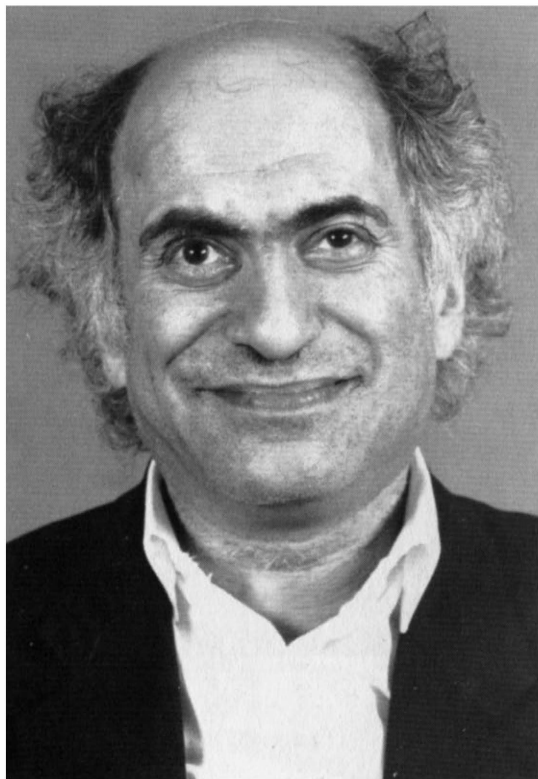
top: Tal in the '80s.

bottom: Tal and Sosonko during the opening of the S.W.I.F.T. tournament in Brussels 1987.



above: Tal watching the game Sosonko-Browne in Wijk aan Zee 1976.

left: Tal in the '80s





left: World Champion Mikhail Botvinnik in the '60s.

below: Botvinnik, Bessel Kok and Tal at the 1988 S.W.I.F.T. tournament in Brussels.





left: Five World Champions in Brussels 1989.

l. to r. standing: Karpov, Kasparov, Botvinnik and Tal, with Spassky in front.

middle: A training session at the Moscow Central Chess Club. l. to r. Botvinnik's nephew Igor Botvinnik, Piket Shirov, Bagirov, Sosonko and Botvinnik.

bottom: Brussels 1991. Botvinnik celebrating his 80th birthday.



# **‘I Must Work, I Must Work’**

*Lev Polugaevsky*

‘Polu-gaevsky? Polu-gaevsky? No there’s no such name’, laughingly asserted a sun-tanned lady, a chance visitor to a chess tournament in the hot September of 1965. ‘But my name really is Polugaevsky’, in embarrassment repeated Lyova<sup>1</sup>, with his luxuriant head of hair, expressive black eyes underneath shaggy eyebrows, rapid-fire speech, and the almost tangible youthful energy of a thirty-year-old. It was then that I first met Lyova, in that already distant 1965 autumn in Sukhumi, where we were playing in the Burevestnik Championship, which was simultaneously a USSR Championship Semi-Final. Although Lyova was already a recognised grandmaster, at that time only a very few were personally admitted into the Final, and he, like practically everyone, had to begin from the Semi-Final. I was not even a master, the difference in class was enormous, and Lyova won trivially against me. The tournament was a long one, lasting nearly a whole month, and I remember not just individual games, but also the sea and the beach, where almost all the participants gathered during the day. And Lyova himself, who was sociable and friendly with those of us who were still very young: Alburt, Gulko, myself... It is interesting that my last purely chess memories of him are also associated with the sea, the sun and the beach. At Aruba in the spring of 1991 we both played matches with the Polgar sisters, he with Judit and I with Sofia, and we saw each other almost every day for three weeks, and talked much and about much.

But of course, there were also numerous meetings at tournaments and Olympiads in Tilburg, Buenos Aires, Plovdiv, Wijk aan Zee, Stockholm, Thessaloniki, at my place in Amsterdam, at his place in Paris, and finally in Monaco in April, a few months before the death of the outstanding grandmaster Lev Abramovich Polugaevsky.

All who knew Lyova as a child remember a boy who was small for his age, incredibly thin, with rapid speech and lively black eyes. Spassky remarked: ‘The first time I saw Lyova was in Leningrad at the junior championships in 1949. I was twelve, and Lyova was a couple of years older. At the time I

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<sup>1</sup> The diminutive form of Lev.

was very good at 'shchelbany'<sup>1</sup>. Then they brought Lyova Polugaevsky over to me, and he simply tore me apart at this game. A few days later we played our first chess game. I began 1.d4. Lyova replied 1...f5. I played 2.g4, and here such chaos ensued on the board, that we became frightened, and within just a few moves agreed a draw.'

I can picture well Lyova's beaming face after he had won one of his best known games at the USSR Championship in Moscow in 1969 against Tal, when I was the second of the losing side. The variation that occurred in this game had been analysed by Misha and me earlier, during our preparations for his match with Kortchnoi, and, as it seemed to us, quite thoroughly. We did not examine in particular detail the position that arose after Black's 20th move. In fact, Black was a piece up, White's rook and knight were attacked, and there did not appear to be any direct threats. Lyova, however, had analysed deeper. He found a continuation of the attack and he won prettily. Geller later remembered that on the evening before this game he had dropped in at Polugaevsky's room in the hotel and had seen some position set out on the board. That same position was reached the following day in Lyova's game against Tal on move 25! It turned out that when Spassky was preparing for his match with Petrosian, he, Geller and Lyova had analysed this variation together, but Lyova in his analysis had gone even further. It cannot be ruled out that, had Geller come to Lyova's room ten minutes later, he might have seen the position not after the 25th, but even after the 30th move, or even later.

Here, two elements are reflected: on the one hand, Lyova's remarkable analytical capabilities, his attempts to dig down to the truth, to calculate everything to the end, and on the other hand, a slight lack of self-confidence. This lack of self-confidence, combined with his excessive respect for the genuine giants of chess, and an overestimation of very many above whom he stood head and shoulders, was a hindrance to Lyova throughout his chess career, and especially in his younger years. 'My most difficult opponent is myself. When I am playing I often involuntarily make a world champion out of a candidate master', he himself once said.

In his all-embracing opening research, Polugaevsky, trying to reduce the role of chance to a minimum, went even further and deeper than Botvinnik. In the method of preparation and analysis, adopted by present-day players, in particular by Kasparov, one can clearly observe the

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1 A not very difficult game, the point of which is to flick the opponent's draughtsmen off the board with your index finger.

trend set by Polugaevsky. A method, in which the opponent is encircled by innovations, just like, as Furman expressed it, in winter hunting, wolves are encircled by flags. At the basis of this method of total opening preparation lies hard work. Where did this originate in Lyova? Was this an individual trait? Was it implanted in his genes from the time when a poor Jew from the provinces, in order to study or simply to live in St Petersburg or Moscow, or to reach the percentage norm<sup>1</sup>, needed all the time to demonstrate that he was better than others? Or should the explanation be sought more deeply, in the amazing lines of Osip Mandelstam: 'Although it is insulting, you should know that there is fornication in work, and it is in our blood.'? To answer these questions is not easy.

Lyova left school with a gold medal, he studied in an arduous Institute of Technology, and for several years he combined his work as an engineer with chess. Who else of the fellow-grandmasters of his generation and standard can say this about themselves?

The basis of his chess victories, along with his outstanding talent, energy and drive, lay in his tireless analytical work. The famous Polugaevsky notebooks, where he recorded the scrupulous results of his day-time and night-time labour! Eye-witnesses relate how the very young Lyova Polugaevsky walked with outstretched arms and an impassioned gaze into the path of an already moving train, in which he had left his notebooks, the fruits of many years of analysis. 'I won't let you pass!!'

Many years later in the spring of 1991 he found himself in a similar situation, when he arrived in Amsterdam and discovered that he had left all his notebooks with analyses and research on the train. Scolding, for appearances's sake, his wife for her carelessness, he was annoyed, of course, but not all that much, not all that much... I do not know, incidentally, if he managed to stop the train in the years of his youth, but the notebooks forgotten on the train to Amsterdam turned up safely within a month at the lost property office, handed in by a guard who had found them. To him these were figures, combined with an incomplete Latin alphabet, with strange pieces on diagrams and text in an incomprehensible language.

The notebooks of his formative years contain not only an enormous amount of analytical work, they are also full of mercilessly critical observations with regard to himself.

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<sup>1</sup> In old Russia only a negligible percentage of those admitted to university were Jews.

'My nerves let me down, I lacked self-control...'

'I play badly in positions where something has to be sacrificed...'

'I am poor at realising an advantage...'

'I get very nervous and experience cowardice when conducting attacks in unclear, double-edged positions...'

At almost all stages of one's chess development, such merciless self-reproach assists in the elimination of deficiencies and helps a player to improve, barring the very final stage, the battle for the title of World Champion, when such criticism, emphasising negative features, can be a hindrance to he who wishes to reach higher and become better than everyone.

Among his diary recordings there is also the following: 'I often end up in time trouble.'

Indeed, in his younger years he was frequently in time trouble. This was, of course, the consequence of the same desire to calculate everything to the end, to find the only correct solution. But, despite the sorrowful look from under the drooping eyebrows, his play in time trouble was normally strong. I remember that Osnos, a regular participant in USSR Championships in the 60s, said: 'The more sorrowful that Lyova looks, the stronger and more deadly his moves.'

After he had passed fifty he became less successful playing under conditions of time shortage. He was terribly vexed by his oversights in Tilburg in 1985. 'You can explain, you are an experienced trainer. Why, why? I had problems with time trouble before, but why now? In every game, where does the time go?' I replied with a mild banality: 'Lyova, you will have heard that when you get older...' Without allowing me to finish, he said heatedly: 'I know, I know, but why me...'

*Sicilian Love* is the name of his last book. From his childhood years this defence entered Polugaevsky's repertoire and remained in various modifications essentially his only weapon against 1.e4. I will venture to give an explanation for this. I think that from the nature of his understanding of the game, where logic dominated, in the depths of his heart he realised that the right of the first move gives a serious advantage. Therefore the classical openings, in which Black fights for gradual equality, seemed to him tedious, and perhaps even dangerous. Hence the Sicilian, an opening in which the centre is conceded, or, more correctly given his name, it is semi-conceded as in Russian 'polu' is a prefix meaning 'half' or 'semi-'. The slightest mistake can have irreparable consequences. On the other hand passive, insufficiently energetic play by White is also punished mercilessly. I cannot imagine Polugaevsky playing the classical variations of the Ruy

Lopez or defending a slightly inferior ending in the Petroff Defence. He himself knew too well how to realise a slight advantage. An admission of Lyova's profound knowledge in this opening was Fischer's first move 1.c4 in their only game, which was played in 1970 and ended in a draw.

But Polugaevsky is not only the Sicilian, and not only forcing variations. Still significant to this day are his monumental strategical concepts against the King's Indian Defence, and how he played the Catalan, the Nimzo-Indian and Réti's Opening! In general, all the games with White won by Polugaevsky are as though baked out of the same dough, mixed out of a profound penetration into the position and the logic of this game.

However, one cannot win numerous tournaments relying only on the opening. The list alone of tournaments that he won, or in which he at least finished in the first three, would occupy some three pages. Young players, who came across Lev Polugaevsky in the last stage of his life, when he was already a spent force, in severe time trouble, sometimes blundering away pieces, leaving theory with White on the second or third move (Lyova? leaving theory?), and who think that he always played like that, should play through his games! Young players, travelling from one open tournament to another, or even the heroes of Linares, young players who pressing a button on the keyboard follow mainly the games of their contemporary opponents and calculate their rating after every game and every move, should play through the best games of Lev Polugaevsky!

Here is the testimony of people who knew him for many years.

Vasily Smyslov: 'I remember Lyova when he was still a teenager, and I knew him practically all his life. We and our families became friends, and we used to visit each other. Lyova was a pleasant and witty companion. In 1962 we played together in Mar del Plata, his first big international tournament, which he won. Already then I saw that he analysed brilliantly, simply brilliantly, and it was no accident that at the Interzonal Tournament in 1964 in Amsterdam Lyova helped me. As a consultant he was also superb. His thinking was very concrete, he was an excellent calculator and a player of outstanding talent. Recently I was playing in Prague and I was playing badly. My score stood at minus two. I knew that in Paris Lyova was seriously ill, but I did not imagine how seriously. I sent him a telegram wishing him health, and also wrote: Dear Lyova, rescue me, I am playing badly, help me. After this humble petition I immediately won two games. For me Lyova's death is a great personal loss. Even though in recent times he lived in Paris, we did not forget each other.'

Vladimir Bagirov: 'I was Lyova's second for many years, and although I will state frankly that we had our disagreements in recent years, he was a grandiose chess player. For the fact that I am a grandmaster and for my achievements in chess, I am greatly indebted to Lyova Polugaevsky.'

Boris Spassky: 'Lyova was somewhat overshadowed by others, who pushed him into the background, but he understood chess better than many of those who achieved greater successes than he did. He understood chess so well, because he analysed a great deal and penetrated exceptionally deeply into a position. After all, he continued developing and became stronger even after he was forty, reaching his peak between the ages of 45-47, when he achieved a harmony between calculation and intuition. In this way he differs from me, for example, or Alekhine or Capablanca, who quickly blossomed but also rather quickly faded. In general, of the players of the same wave, Petrosian, Tal, Stein, myself, Kortchnoi and Polugaevsky, the last two stand apart. They continued to develop even after the age of forty, thanks to their untiring analytical work, and Kortchnoi reached his peak in Baguio when he was already 47. I think that in the second match in Buenos Aires Polugaevsky was no weaker than Kortchnoi, perhaps even superior to him, but the whole match atmosphere created by Kortchnoi had a depressing effect on Lyova. Also as a trainer he was splendid. Everything else was pushed aside, and there remained only his pure, subtle understanding of the game.'

Viktor Kortchnoi: 'He and I had difficult relations. Yes, I do indeed have a big plus score against him, but there was a period, from roughly 1960 till 1966, when Polugaevsky regularly to beat me. He was quite a striking player, and his name will undoubtedly remain in chess theory. He could have been a serious contender for the World Championship, had he not remained for ever that same fifteen-year-old boy he was when he came into big-time chess.'

In Kortchnoi's cruel words there is a certain sense, but what could Lyova do if he did not have that malicious streak, and hatred was alien to him? What could he do if, right to the end of his days, he did indeed retain a kind of childishness, a kind of naivety, together with a tinge of provinciality, mildness, unwillingness to offend, and good-nature? Who knows, perhaps the compensation for these qualities was The Variation, his variation in the Sicilian Defence, one of the most sharp, provocative and risky.

One has to agree with Spassky, that the entire atmosphere at the Kortchnoi-Polugaevsky match in Buenos Aires in 1980 – the non-shaking

of hands, the minor conflicts and clashes – all this affected Polugaevsky to a much greater degree than his opponent. Kortchnoi was accustomed to such an atmosphere from the time of his match with Petrosian in 1974, which for him was a kind of training ground for subsequent serious battles, more particularly those away from the board. Who knows how that match in Buenos Aires would have ended, had the battle been fought only on the 64 squares.

Lyova himself, however, was rather restrained when he talked about his chances in the battle for the title of World Champion. As he pointed out in *Sicilian Love*: 'Indeed, compared with other players I do not have that 'killer instinct', the existence of which could have given a different turn to some of my matches, and who knows, I might possibly have achieved greater successes. There is no doubt that I do not have the character of a champion. I do not have the warlike nature of a Kasparov, a Karpov or a Fischer. But, on the other hand, Euwe, Smyslov and Petrosian also lacked this destructive energy.' Here it is hard not to agree with Polugaevsky. He indeed did not have the cold glance of Karpov, thrusting the steel blade into his opponent. Nor his way of analysing, when after a game the search for truth is often replaced by a demonstration of his superiority, which had often already been evident during the game, but which he wanted to emphasise even more. There was not that 'I', 'I', 'I', with which every second sentence of Kasparov begins, or his analysis after a game with blows by the pieces on the board and at the ego of the opponent. There was also not that colossal, self-concentrated energy of Fischer, which so affected the opponent. But at those moments, when tournament fate pinned him to the wall, when only a win would suffice, he could both compose himself, and play with amazing drive. The condolences of the participants in the 1973 Interzonal Tournament, regarding the virtual impossibility of winning his game from the last round against Portisch, provoked in Lyova a cry of the heart: 'If it comes to that, I've even won against World Champions!' And he won that game, with which his direct participation in the battle for the World Championship began.

In the West I first met Polugaevsky in Holland, in Hilversum in 1973. He was playing in the AVRO-Tournament in distinguished company: Szabo, Geller, Ivkov, the brilliant technician Andersson, the explosive, multilingual Ljubojevic, the young and dangerous tactician Sax, and a thin young man, with long hair down to his shoulders, Timman. Lyova and I used to go for a walk after his games. We talked a lot, but very often it was a

monologue by him, with questions thrown in from time to time. Sometimes Lyova, without waiting for my responses, would himself provide the reply. For me, who had already passed through the Donner school, this was nothing remarkable. We talked largely about life in the West. I think that he himself realised, when he moved to Paris in 1991, that these replies and the opinions formed did not always accord with reality. In these questions he was as though weighing up, as did nearly every Soviet citizen, albeit contemplatively and theoretically: I wonder, what would it be like if I were suddenly to find myself here?

Twenty years later, life, shuffling fates like cards so that you never know how and where the trumps will turn up, transported him to Paris. This new life, with its different concepts, attitudes, and a new language (how difficult towards the end of your sixth decade), with its detested definite and indefinite articles, devised by God knows whom and for what reason, did not attenuate the problems, they simply became different.

During this period of almost two decades I played about ten games with Lyova, losing one in Tilburg in 1983 and not winning once. Among the draws there were several memorable games. One in Vinkovci, in Yugoslavia in 1976, when I first made the grandmaster norm. By a miracle I escaped with Black. Another in Buenos Aires at the Olympiad in 1978, when for the first time the USSR team failed to win the gold medals. The Soviet team played Holland in the last round and they needed to win by a big score in order to overtake the Hungarians, who were leading. I remember how nervous Lyova was, both before the game and at the end of it, when I did not immediately agree to his offer of a draw. I know that he, who scored plus five on his board and played better than anyone in the Soviet team, was made one of the scapegoats after the lost Olympiad, as the second place of the USSR team was assessed at that time. This role of scapegoat was familiar to Lyova from childhood, when he became the target of jests, banter and practical jokes. Even his name, to say nothing of his surname<sup>1</sup>, was played on by chess poets and journalists: semi-, semi-known, semi-grandmaster and so on. The combination of Lyova from Mogilyova suggested itself, especially since it corresponded to his place of birth, Mogilyov. Of the amusing stories associated with him and practical jokes on the young Polugaevsky, his contemporary Gufeld could compile a small book. Often Lyova himself laughed along with everyone, but who knows

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1 'Lev' in Russian means 'lion', and, as mentioned earlier, 'polu' means 'half' or 'semi-'.

whether he did not sometimes have the inner feeling of Gogol's Akaky Akakievich: 'Leave me alone, why do you so offend me?'

I remember how in Thessaloniki in 1984, during the Olympiad, he reached the age of fifty. The day before, our six-hour game had ended in a draw. 'I don't understand', said Lyova in surprise, 'How can I be fifty? Just yesterday I was playing in the Russian Federation Junior Championship, and now suddenly I am fifty. No, can you tell me, how can this be?'

He did not understand that talent is essentially nothing other than the ability to find one's own destiny, and that he, Lev Polugaevsky, had found his destiny. In constant training sessions, preparations for Semi-Finals, Finals, Interzonal Tournaments and Candidates Matches, and in problems relating to his family, flat, car, and dacha, life had rushed on. In his immersion in life, in everyday concerns, he was in his own way a very down-to-earth person.

Spassky remembers: 'In the 70s, we and a whole group of grandmasters were at a reception with Tyazhelnikov<sup>1</sup>. He spoke lengthily about the importance of our contribution to the building of communism, about our trips for this purpose. I don't recall what the others replied, but I immediately said that the building of communism was not for me, whereas Lyova began asking something about expenses for the journey.' In contrast to several of his colleagues, Polugaevsky was not a member of the Party, and whenever joining the Party was suggested, he preferred to keep quiet.

In the mid-80s at my home in Amsterdam he picked up the record of a Russian bard, who sang in the restaurants at Brighton Beach in New York and was fashionable in Moscow. 'Do you like him?' I asked. 'Well, I don't know, it's a record everyone has in Moscow.' In Moscow, Lyova belonged to the circle that made it a rule not to be lagging behind, to be the first to have everything, whether it was a small transistor radio in the 60s, or a video recorder, for example, much later, to the circle of people who travelled abroad, and achieved success. Somewhere in the late 80s and early 90s that same category of prestige began to include the ability to travel freely, not to emigrate, but simply to go abroad and take a look – to live for a while or send one's children to study. Lyova began spending long periods in Paris – after all, he had been bitten by the lure of foreign countries long before – and in 1991 he finally settled there.

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1 At that time the chief of the Department of Propaganda of the Communist Party's Central Committee.

When he had passed away, I wondered: had it not been for the incredible pace and head-spinning gyration of Paris life, perhaps he would have still been alive. After all, longevity is in his family: both his father and his mother easily passed their eighth decade. I suggested this very cautiously to Ira, his widow. 'What do you mean', she replied. 'Didn't you know Lyova? In Moscow he would have been even more unhappy.' It was difficult not to agree with her, since the formula 'ubi bene, ibi patria' was in the end not thought up by him. One can hardly see him sitting quietly in Moscow or at the dacha, while thinking that somewhere, in New York! London! Paris!, real life was going on without him. One involuntarily recalls the sigh of the old Socrates about a man, who had returned from distant lands: 'How could he have changed, if all the time he was dragging himself with him.'

After he moved to Paris we quite often spoke on the telephone, and sometimes saw each other. I remember a lengthy monologue of his about the fact that chess was completely different now, about its future, and about computers. He said that the generation that had grown up without the computer found it very difficult to readjust, and that he himself used the computer only when preparing articles, that lengthy sessions with it leave you stale, stifle your play, cause fatigue, and deprive you of the freshness needed when playing. He thought that excessive working with computers was having an adverse affect on the play of Beliavsky and to some extent Yusupov.

He was always full of ideas, sometimes cranky and unreal, but frequently they were logical and were later put into practice. When he spoke about them, he would keep asking: 'Not bad, what do you think, not bad, eh?' Few people know that both the tournament between veterans and the strongest women players, and the famous tournaments in Monaco, held under the patronage of Joop van Oosterom, were largely his ideas.

He himself began to play more rarely and less successfully. What told, of course, were his age and his new concerns. But to an even greater extent the illness, which began with gaps in his memory and turned into a brain tumour. He once said to his wife during a tournament: 'Do you know, Ira, I can't see the middle of the board.' The operation, performed eighteen months before he died, appeared to have been a success. He was regaining his health and making plans: 'You know, in analysis I'm already fine, I see a great deal, almost as well as before, but playing, playing is still difficult...'

I saw Lyova for the last time in Monaco, a few months before his death. The illness and the operation had removed the remaining hair on his head. Earlier, with a characteristic movement of both hands he skilfully used to camouflage with two or three strands his extensive bald patch. He quickly became tired, but his eyes and his smile were the same, and he happily sat following the games on the monitors in the tournament press centre. Perhaps his speech did not flow with such rapidity as earlier, and for the first time I heard from him, formerly so distant from religion, the words: 'God', 'belief', and 'I have never done anything bad to anyone in my life'. When we parted, we embraced very warmly and agreed that at the first opportunity I would come to Paris to play a few training games, which would help him to return to tournament play. I accidentally said to him: 'Proshchai', a Russian word of portentous meaning, combining both the word of parting, and simultaneously farewell, and forgive me, forgive me during our separation, if I have in any way offended you.

But already within a few days after his return to Paris the symptoms appeared again. In the country where Lyova spent almost his entire life, traditionally doctors do not tell a patient about the hopelessness of his illness. It is also considered correct for his loved ones to hide the cruel truth from him. That was also the case with Lyova, who was told that it was a virus, and that it should all pass over. Did he himself realise about the return of the terrible illness, which in the majority of cases signifies death itself?

Of course, life is not always the longer the better, but death is always the longer the worse. It was the most subtle, amazing organ, the brain, that was affected, and Lev Polugaevsky's death was a prolonged agony. This is from a splendid Russian writer, who also died in Paris: 'It was an easy life I asked of God. I should have asked for an easy death.'

At moments when he was lucid he would cry, seeing his helplessness from the side, and saying: 'Well now, I must work, I must work.' He was very restless, and every morning he would take a sheet of paper, relating it to some imaginary fax, and would repeat again and again: 'Work, I must work.' He once said to his nurses in the hospital: 'You know, I think that yesterday I didn't recognise my own wife.' His nurses, who loved him and knew how to give him pleasure, began playing chess with each other. He laughed a great deal, watching their ridiculous moves, and repeating all the time in English 'It's bad, it's bad...'

In the next stage of his illness his slowly failing consciousness discarded other languages: English, and the French that he had just about managed to learn, leaving just one – his native language. From his consciousness de-

parted lots of things: his flat and insurance, francs and dollars, contracts and obligations, everything to which he had devoted masses of time and which seemed so important and pressing. He no longer had to be concerned about what they would say in the Sports Committee, in the Federation, how and what to say, or altogether to think something up. There remained only one thing: that game which had captivated that thin, ten-year-old lad with black sparkling eyes in distant wartime Kuybyshev, that ancient and marvellous game which had made his name known to millions. Chess had given him everything: the world, which he had seen with his own eyes, material prosperity, fame, and finally the most important thing, the possibility of expressing himself. It did not give him old age, not such a bad stage of human life, provided you do not know how it relates to the start. I cannot, however, imagine Lyova as an old man. After all he died young, since youth is not a stage in life but rather a characteristic of the soul.

His brain, impaired by the rapidly growing tumour, wove amazing associations, responding only to one stimulus – chess.

A chess board with pieces was always alongside his bed. Sometimes he would begin a game with an imaginary opponent. He would knit his brows, wrinkle his forehead, smooth his non-existent hair, and look searchingly sorrowful, assuming the chess facial expression familiar to all who ever played with him. At the very end he could not even do this, and his wife, almost to the very last day, would tap the pieces on the board, provoking, with their sounds, wonderful associations that had for ever entered into his soul. Suddenly he would give descriptions of his grandmaster colleagues which, in the words of his wife, were amazingly apt, although also merciless, expressing everything that had accumulated somewhere in the depths of his soul, but had never brought himself to say or write.

He more than once said to his wife: 'Kortchnoi is my favourite player, you cannot even imagine what a colossal player he is.' He did not change his opinion, however badly Kortchnoi spoke or wrote about him, and he continued to greet him, even when the other man used to turn aside. Not long before his death, when the remaining names had left even his sub-conscious, there remained one, which he would repeat in a whisper: 'Kortchnoi', and he would raise his thumb as a sign of his assessment of his play. On one of his very last days his wife said: 'You know, in two months time Piket and Polgar will be playing a match. And you will be Judit's second, and Kortchnoi will be Piket's, and in this way you will again play a

match.’ This idea suddenly put him in a good mood and he even cheered up and repeated: ‘Yes, we will play again, we will play...’

In psychology, the paradox is generally accepted that a hostage or victim may suddenly begin to experience warm feelings for his tormentor. Whether Lyova had similar feelings with regard to Kortchnoi, who twice stood in his path to the title of World Champion, I do not know and I would not venture to say. I cannot agree with Kortchnoi’s explanation that it was his painful conscience speaking out. According to Kortchnoi, Lyova had written erroneous reports for the Soviet press during his match with Karpov. I also do not think that he was giving vent to regrets, regarding his lack of severity, which is almost a synonym for coarseness and tactlessness, abruptness, or what in the Soviet Union used to be called competitive malice. I think that it was simply a feeling of joyful wonder, at what he himself had lacked in chess. The gambling element in this logical game, the sudden employment of a variation that the opponent was not expecting, perhaps not always correct, but one that would take him out of his normal state, the ability suddenly to change the character of the position, and the resolution to say ‘no’, with your flag hanging, in a double-edged position, in reply to your opponent’s offer of a draw.

A few days later, when even these last visions left Lyova, when chess departed, he himself departed. Lev Polugaevsky died on 30 August 1995 in Paris, a city where other chess players who had been born in Russia also lived: Osip Bernstein, Savielly Tartakower, Alexander Alekhine. He is buried, like Alekhine, at the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris, and their graves are quite close.

# The Chess King of Odessa

Efim Geller

The second of August 1974 was a free day before the final round of the IBM Tournament. The last performance at the Tuschinski Cinema had just finished, and I was standing on the street with Vladimir Tukmakov in the evening bustle of Amsterdam. 'Do you think it would be better to offer a draw right now, or to wait for tomorrow's game?' my companion asked. He was in excellent spirits: he had led throughout the tournament, and, leading his rivals by a whole point, had practically assured himself of first place. The last round game with Efim Geller should not cause much anxiety: the tournament had not gone well for Geller. He had only a fifty per cent score, he had nothing to aspire to; besides, both were from Odessa, to say nothing of the fact that they would have to report back to the USSR Sports Committee. 'I decided not to knock on his door', Tukmakov recalled the following day at the Closing Ceremony of the tournament, in which he shared 1st-3rd places. 'A strip of light was showing from under the door, on the handle of which hung a 'do not disturb' sign, and I distinctly heard the tapping of chess pieces on a board.' Although the game from the last round lasted 40 moves, Tukmakov effectively did not survive the opening. His position was already hopeless somewhere around move 15.

Now, a quarter of a century later, I can picture well the Geller of that time. A man of few words, with a characteristic facial expression, frequent rocking of the head, accompanied by a sceptical raising of the eyebrows, his checked jacket, which he carefully hung on the back of his chair, and the ashtray, full of cigarette-ends, always alongside him. In those days it was permitted to smoke directly at the board, and he smoked a great deal. Obstinate, with a dimpled chin and a slow waddle, Geller's entire appearance was more that of a former boxer, or an elderly boatswain who had come onshore, rather than the world-class grandmaster he was. It was with this same gait that he walked onto the stage of the Central House of Railway Workers in Moscow back in 1949 for his first USSR Championship, in order to remain in the world chess elite for several decades.

For all those years he stood at the very summit of the chess pyramid of his country, about which Hans Ree once said: 'When I am in the USSR, I have the feeling that every tram conductor plays chess better than I do.' But then, back in 1949, a sensation occurred. A win in the last round with White

against Kholmov would give the young player from Odessa, who had only just become a master, the championship gold medal. In a Ruy Lopez, where Kholmov had chosen the rare Bird Variation, Geller proved unprepared and lost. This was to happen to Geller on more than one occasion, such a defeat in the last round, often in very important games. Against Keres in a match, for example, or against Sax in Moscow in the last round of the Interzonal. Excessive emotion? A gambling instinct? A striving for the maximum?

At the time of his Moscow debut, Geller was 24 years old, which is by no means young by the standards of today. But for Geller the best years for his development as a chess player came during the war, when there was no time for chess. He became a grandmaster three years later, and in 1953 he was playing in his first Candidates event, the famous Zurich Tournament. He was to qualify for six such Candidates events during his career, in one of which, in 1962, he finished just half a point behind the winner, Petrosian. There were victories in numerous international tournaments, close on ten Olympiads, and participation in twenty-three Championships of the USSR, the strongest chess power in the world. He won this championship twice, the first time in 1955, and the second in 1979, at the age of 54, an amazing record. But it was not just a question of competitive laurels and titles. Efim Geller left his own, vivid mark on chess.

Vasily Smyslov calls him a genuine chess classic: 'He was at the forefront when chess was flourishing in our empire. He defeated all the leading players, without exception. As for the fact that he did not become World Champion, this is granted from above, for this you need to have a particular star in your fate. Geller was not granted this star, but he was a splendid, vivid, dynamic player.'

Boris Spassky describes Geller as a very complete player: 'He was very thoughtful, and under his completeness and thoughtfulness even Fischer often cracked. When Geller was on song he could crush anyone. I always admired this thoughtfulness of his. Not only the excellently played opening, this goes without saying, but the thoughtfulness of his play after it, the planning. He was a grandmaster of very high class, and he would play one or two games a year which would determine the direction that chess took in this or that opening. Such a game was his win against Smyslov in the Grünfeld Defence in the 1965 match, where he several times sacrificed his queen.'

Anatoly Karpov says: 'Geller's ideas were deep, although Botvinnik in his time said to me: all Geller's ideas should be checked three times. And indeed, if he got carried away he could miss something in analysis. He was

incredibly obstinate, but perhaps in chess it is sometimes not a bad thing to uphold your ideas. In a training group he was difficult, he tried to push the others aside, and for this reason at some point I stopped working with him.'

Mark Taimanov describes him as a maximalist: 'Geller had his own clearly formed creative credo, he possessed great strategic imagination, and he was utterly devoted to the game. We played an enormous number of games, one of the most memorable of which was in the last round of the USSR Championship in 1952, when he won against me, and Botvinnik won by some miracle against Suetin, so that Botvinnik caught me. Geller always strived for the utmost. I remember the Alekhine Memorial in Moscow in 1956, which would now be called a super-tournament. The World Champion and all the strongest grandmasters were playing: Botvinnik, Smyslov, Bronstein, Keres, Gligoric, Najdorf, Szabo and Unzicker. Geller himself did not play in the tournament. 'Well, fifth place would be alright', I replied to his question of how I thought I would do. He smiled characteristically: 'Without thinking about first place I simply could not play.' In general the players of our generation, Averbakh, Geller, I, and to a lesser extent Bronstein and Petrosian, were trained to do constant and deep analytical work. Still, in this respect I think that Geller stood out amongst us.'

Geller's analytical work always had one aim: to find the best move in the position. Not simply a good one, but the best, which would determine the very essence of the position. He was completely engrossed in chess, completely focused on it. Lev Alburt, remembering Geller in Odessa in the late 50s, remarked on his rare combination of diligence and inventiveness, and a complete absence of superficiality: 'If there is an expression 'Down to earth', then about Geller one can definitely say 'Down to chess'.'

'What do you mean – draw? What are you talking about?' Geller lectured me after I had lost to Jansa in Amsterdam in 1974. 'You stood better. Where? Well, show me the game, show me. I feel offended for the position.' This 'offended for the position' I hear as if it were said yesterday.

'Every morning in the Crimea, where we were preparing for the match with Fischer', Spassky recalls, 'I saw Geller looking at one and the same position, the Sicilian with the black queen at b2. He tried this and that, both with the rook at b1 and other set-ups, although I said to him that the correct idea was putting the knight on b3. But he kept insisting on his own view, he was very obstinate. His diligence was extraordinary. He developed

his talent by sitting on his backside, and his backside in turn developed thanks to his talent.'

Geller himself said: 'If I feel anxious or uncomfortable, I sit down at the chess board for some 5-6 hours and gradually come to.'

According to those who knew him closely, he could be in such a state for days. Clearly, the time that Geller spent analysing greatly exceeded the hours that the chess clock was ticking alongside and an opponent was sitting opposite. Chess did not leave him day or night. 'Sometimes in his sleep he would whisper chess moves', his widow Oksana remembers, 'or, on waking up at night, he would go over to the table to write down some variation that had suddenly come to mind.'

At the Olympiad in Lucerne in 1982 I talked to him about expanding my opening repertoire. Geller advised me to include the Closed, Chigorin Variation of the Ruy Lopez. I asked him: 'And how much time would be needed to master it?' He thought briefly. 'At your level?' – I used to play regularly at Tilburg and at Wijk aan Zee, the strongest tournaments in the world. 'To compile everything, process, understand and apply it? Well, a year and a half...' Of course, this was in pre-computer times, but what is characteristic is the approach itself to the question.

He understood at an early age the ancient truth that success awaits he who is well prepared. His knowledge of the opening was exceptionally deep, and the words of Botvinnik are well known: 'Before Geller we did not really understand the King's Indian Defence.' In opening theory there is always the concept of what is 'in vogue'. Geller never paid any attention to this, being himself the legislator of fashion, following his own ideas and principles.

At the Interzonal Tournament in Petropolis in 1973, Bronstein, after choosing a difficult variation of the Alekhine Defence and losing to Geller practically without a struggle, tried to justify himself: 'But what should I have played against him? After all, he knows everything.'

While splendidly playing the start of the game, Geller himself understood very well that the opening is only the prelude to the struggle. He knew that you have to be ready for everything, from a sharp middlegame to a tedious endgame, from passive defence to rapid-tempo play. He said to the young Dorfman about Beliavsky and Romanishin, who were already established in the USSR arena: 'Don't take them as examples, they are one-sided players' – emphasising, in his opinion, their predilection to a certain type of position.

From many of Geller's games one can learn the highest technique of the game, technique, which, according to the definition of Vladimir Horowitz, is nothing other than to have a completely clear impression of what you want and to possess the full potential for completely fulfilling this task. This definition of technique is applicable not only to music, but also to chess. Efim Geller possessed such technique.

Viktor Kortchnoi noted: 'In his best games Geller approached the level of genius, although it was he who I had in mind when I wrote in my autobiography that genius and evil are compatible things. There were all these intrigues and plots against me by him and Petrosian. I played my first game against Geller in the Championship of the Nauka Sports Society in 1951 and I lost with Black in a Schara-Hennig Gambit. He was a brilliant player, of course, and he introduced much that was new into the theory of the opening. Perhaps someone played this way earlier, but his handling, for example, of the unprepossessing move Be2 in the Sicilian forced the whole complex of these positions to be looked at anew. In his younger years he was primarily a tactician, but then he grew up and began handling in his own way both the opening and chess in general. But as for his human qualities...'

Geller did indeed begin as a tactician, although he himself, looking back at a mature age, recalled: 'I understood the importance of the strategic side of the game even in those years when I would bring out my rooks in front of my pawns and launch a wild piece attack. But in the late 50s to early 60s I experienced an internal change. It would not be right to consider this a shift from tactics to strategy. If one tries to express what it consisted of, it can only be a question of a gradual, continuous shift to deeper play. I was never lazy, but in 1958-60 I really began studying in earnest.'

One of the best known examples of his analytical talent was the brilliant draw in the seemingly hopeless adjourned position from the Botvinnik-Fischer game at the Varna Olympiad in 1962. Botvinnik later admitted that it was Geller, who, deep into the night, found the paradoxical idea that saved the game. Two separated pawns successfully opposed two connected passed pawns, in contradiction, seemingly, to all the laws of rook endings. The idea came completely unexpected to Fischer.

However, there is a great difference between analysis and the actual process of playing. A game of chess is not a theorem, and the one who wins is by no means always the most logical and consistent, but often the one with the greatest endurance, the one who is the most practical, clever, or simply

lucky. It sounds paradoxical, but the depth of Geller's ideas, the search for the best and only move, often rebounded on him. His deficiencies were the direct continuation of his virtues. Thinking for an hour or more would lead to time trouble, and sometimes the edifice, lovingly constructed over a period of hours, would come unstuck in a few minutes. It was no accident that the number of games that Geller lost by overstepping the time limit was rather high. At such moments his appearance would be completely vacant, and his arm would simply not raise itself to make a bad move, or the first one that came to hand. Tal once remarked that the number of one-move blunders by Geller was greater than by any other grandmaster of his class. The explanation was often the same. Perched on his high thoughts, Geller sometimes did not notice the obvious. 'He cannot behold what is under his feet and imagines that he can discern what is in the sky', laughed the Trachian girl at the philosopher who had fallen into the same trap more than two thousand years ago.

'After making this move, I immediately noticed another, better one', Geller himself once recalled. 'After this I simply could no longer play this game.' A feeling which, I am sure, is completely unfamiliar, for example, to Karpov, who would have imperturbably continued fighting in the newly changed situation. The striving for logic and completeness more than once played an adverse role for Geller the practical player.

He also had another vulnerable point. He had, as Spassky put it, a 'glass jaw'. Geller would lose his way when faced with unexpected counterplay. 'When such play began, it was difficult for him, and therefore he simply could not adapt to me', the former World Champion recalls.

In the Geller-Kortchnoi Candidates Match in 1971 in Moscow I was Kortchnoi's second. It was the 7th game that proved decisive. The game was adjourned and would be resumed the following day. Although Kortchnoi, as White, had the better position, no matter how we tried we could not find a direct win. We took a time-out before the resumption, which was still possible in those days. But even a whole day of analysis did not produce anything concrete. It was then that we decided on a practical approach. Immediately after resuming the game, instead of lengthy positional manoeuvring, Kortchnoi would sacrifice a piece. Objectively, given correct defence, this sacrifice should have led to a draw, but Geller immediately thought for a long time, ended up in time trouble, and lost effectively without a struggle. The match was decided. It is no accident that, while noting Geller's remarkable talent, Kortchnoi once remarked that sometimes he could simply be taken by storm.

But it was not only a change of situation on the board that was his vulnerable point. A game of chess is full of emotions, very often invisible to the spectators, and Geller was not always able to keep his emotions under control. At the tournament in Las Palmas in 1980, with Black in the basic position of the Queen's Indian, he castled on the 6th move and offered me a draw. He had obviously taken this decision beforehand. Now he calmly surveyed the board from the height of his rating and renown, and the positive score that he had built up against me by that time. I considered briefly, said that I wanted to play on, and replied with a pawn sacrifice that had just come into fashion. Geller's face completely changed. He turned his glance from me to the board, to Petrosian, who was standing behind me, and again to the board, not making a reply for a quarter of an hour. Finally he controlled himself and took the pawn. This game ended in a draw, but with Fischer in Mallorca at the Interzonal in 1970 it turned out differently. On that occasion Geller decided not to risk the complications of the Sicilian and on his first move with White brought out his king's knight. Fischer in turn decided against playing the King's Indian and chose a classical set-up. Sixteen years later it was to occur frequently in Karpov's match with Kasparov, when Karpov would try to exploit White's minimal advantage. But Geller, after taking a pawn on the 7th move, offered a draw. Fischer's first reaction was to laugh. Geller too began to laugh – the situation was clear: the American was Black, he had lost his three previous games to Geller, and the position was completely symmetrical. Suddenly Fischer stopped laughing, bent down and said something to Geller. Geller did not understand foreign languages. I saw many times how someone would address him in English or German. A broad smile usually appeared on his face and he would amicably nod his head whatever was said to him. It is not known what Fischer said, although one of the spectators asserted that he distinctly heard 'Too early'. But whatever it was that the future World Champion said to Geller, it became clear to the latter that Fischer wanted to continue the game. Geller went terribly red and just two moves later in the simple position he thought for a whole hour. Within a few more moves he found himself a pawn down. The rook ending that soon arose was, however, level. The game was adjourned, but it did not prove possible for Geller to restore his emotional equilibrium. After the resumption, a draw seemed inevitable, until on the 71st move he made a fatal mistake.

He himself understood perfectly well that here it was a matter not just of squares and diagonals. After losing by a crushing score to Spassky, he wrote about his opponent: 'His staggering calmness and composure enable

him at the most difficult moments to find the best practical measures. The amazing imperturbability and confidence with which he sometimes makes moves that are by no means good, certainly puts his opponents in an ambiguous position.' Geller himself was far from imperturbable. Whereas in play with representatives of his own generation, such as Taimanov or Bronstein, things were limited to an internal struggle, with the younger players, he, excitable and emotional, could not keep himself under control, sometimes even during a game.

Iosif Dorfman remembers: 'In the last round of the Zonal USSR Championship in Yerevan in 1982 I needed a win to qualify for the Interzonal Tournament, whereas a draw would suit Geller. When I was considering my move, Geller, standing opposite, said, leaning over the board: 'All the same you won't win against me.' The game ended in a draw, and Geller, who had now calmed down, apologised.'

The Hoogovens tournament of 1975 was an unusually strong one. I was in the leading group with plus three, and in the twelfth round I had White against Geller, who had fifty percent. It should not be forgotten that only three years earlier I had left the USSR, and simply did not exist there, having been vaporized, in Orwellian language. This game therefore, apart from its competitive aspect, also had another one for Geller. He tried to intimidate me completely during the game, looking daggers at me and bashing the clock. After recording a move, he would noisily place a pawn on his scoresheet, adding to it a queen or a rook. But immediately after I resigned, he changed into good nature itself: 'Maybe you would have done better to take with the pawn on e5?' I also heard similar stories from other players, younger than himself. I think that here it was partly the fact that he himself had never been a child-prodigy, or one of the favoured highly-promising, who, as it seemed to him, received much that was ready-prepared and undeserved. There was also something here from the boatswain, or the tutor, sternly teaching the young to think sensibly. But mainly it was something else and he himself expressed it best. At the USSR Championship in Vilnius in 1980 Geller found it very hard going. Severe time trouble in almost every game, blunders, and blood pressure approaching breaking-point. 'Perhaps it would be best to withdraw, Efim Petrovich', they cautiously advised him. 'Withdraw? What do you mean withdraw? What about my stipend? And international tournaments? And my place in the team? It is easy for you to say withdraw.'

Of course, in any type of sport, especially professional sport, the difference between winning and losing is appreciable, but nowhere was it so enormous as in the Soviet Union. Chess enjoyed a privileged position compared with other types of sport, and a decent result at a tournament in the West was equivalent to several annual salaries. On a single half point often depended not only your entire future career, but also the well-being of your family. Many who travelled for the first time to a tournament abroad knew that there would not be another similar opportunity. This enormous responsibility could have the most unexpected consequences. Thus at the tournament in Wijk aan Zee in 1964, Ivo Nei, who was not even a grandmaster, shared first place with Keres, ahead of Portisch, Ivkov, Larsen and many other well-known grandmasters. On the other hand, the performance of Igor Platonov six years later, again at Wijk aan Zee, was a complete failure: minus four and one of the bottom places. Even famous grandmasters, at the very top of the gigantic pyramid in the USSR, could not vouch for their future. Their chess career could be cut short for an indefinite period at any time and sometimes be altogether destroyed. I think that it was primarily this, and not just differences in character and mentality, that explains the frequently prickly, watchful and often openly hostile relations, which always accompanied the top of Soviet chess. What with visits to the Sports Committee, with letters to Party organs and other bodies, with the favour or malice of the all-powerful Party officials, on whom often hung your fate and whose names have long since sunk into oblivion.

As Spassky remarked: 'Playing against Fischer, especially when the latter was very young, Geller with his entire appearance and facial expression showed: 'You're just a little shit, aspiring to be a genius.' An attitude which Fischer certainly sensed. I also remember a training session of the Russian team before one of the Spartakiads, where we were looking at the Sveshnikov Variation. Sveshnikov himself was giving the demonstration. You should have seen Geller then. He contemptuously pursed his lips, rolled his eyes and sighed loudly, saying that you couldn't play this way, that Black's position was full of holes, while he completely overlooked Black's trumps. I have to give Sveshnikov his due, others would have got angry, but he behaved impeccably. No, Geller was not a good-natured person, rather he worked under the pretence of being so. But he helped me a great deal during my match with Petrosian in 1969, and in the match with Fischer he was effectively the only one who really helped me. Neither Nei nor Krogius helped me, nor did Boleslavsky, who arrived at the very end, having analysed openings which did not in fact occur in the match,

whereas Geller really worked and suffered. Although practically all those who he trained lost their matches. Here there was, I think, also a degree of envy. Why him, and not me? Well, and obstinacy, often hostile. These feelings sometimes prevailed over his remarkable chess qualities. No, I do not think that he made any intrigues, but he was certainly a very tricky person, that is for sure. He was good-natured, but not sentimental, an outwardly good-natured man from Odessa, although, of course, he was an opportunist and did everything that was advantageous to him. When it suited him he went over to Karpov. During my reign as Champion I followed one piece of his advice, although I didn't use to listen to anyone and preferred to go my own way. He said to me: 'Boris Vasilievich, you are World Champion. You stand at the summit, don't interfere with the affairs of the Candidates, in their disputes, their problems. They are not your affair, not the affair of the Champion.' I retain good memories of him...'

Geller's last few chess years were difficult ones. Although he himself, just before his fiftieth birthday, wrote that 'we should not close our eyes to the fact that we all, sooner or later, lose the game to the severe and invincible opponent, time', one always likes to believe that this relates to others, and not to oneself. 'There is no secret: with the advancing years you have to work more. That's all', he said after winning the USSR Championship at the age of 54. But very soon he realised that no amount of analysis and no amount of work can compensate for the effortlessness, enormous desire and willpower of the young. Accustomed to analysing everything and always delving for the truth, he himself gave this diagnosis of a player of advancing years: 'What is reduced, more than anything, is stability in calculating the numerous little variations that comprise the ordinary fabric, 'positional play' in the usual jargon. The danger of oversights increases. These normally occur off-stage, and do not take the form of actual blunders. One is able to diverge from the fatal path at the last minute only at the cost of a greater or lesser worsening of the position. But from the side this looks almost like incomprehension.'

Nevertheless he remained true to himself, uncompromising, upholding his chess correctness. If it seemed to Geller that the laws of chess had been broken, that something had been done not according to the rules, he would again sink into lengthy thought, considering it his duty to punish, to refute, to demonstrate.

'He who has not the courage to carry out his ideas, loses the ability of a fighter and is approaching his twilight', wrote Lasker. Right to the end

Geller had the courage to carry out his ideas, but he lacked the strength. He lost without scoring in both his mini-matches at the knock-out tournament in Tilburg, to Chandler in 1992 and to Van Wely the following year. Yet, in none of the games did he forgo his principles, by prematurely reducing the tension or neutralising the position. 'I just don't have the strength anymore', he said with an apologetic smile.

I also remember how, towards the end of 1987, on his return from India, where he had lost to a 17-year-old youth who had spent somewhere in the region of half an hour on the entire game, I asked him: 'What's this I hear about you losing to a little boy, Efim Petrovich?', trying to strike the right note. 'Little boy?' He looked at me with disapproval: 'I may have lost to a future World Champion.'

I do not think that Geller, even in his best years, would have been comfortable in modern chess. Not only because of all the rapid and blitz tournaments, of which he was never a supporter. 'I never was a blitz player', he said after he had not even scored fifty per cent in a blitz-tournament in Amsterdam in 1975. I think also that the new time control, which punishes lengthy thinking, the disappearance of adjourned games, and the prominent rule of the computer in opening preparation, would have neutralised his natural qualities. These developments would have run counter to the type of chess in which he grew up and in which he gained outstanding successes. Yet, a lot of what seems obvious and straightforward in present-day chess is based on positions and principles which were developed by the best players and analysts of the 50s, 60s and 70s. And one of the most significant of these was Efim Geller.

He was born into and grew up in a Jewish family in Odessa, although he was quite indifferent to his Jewishness. 'It was that he was regarded as a Jew', in the words of his widow Oksana, a phrase which will be understandable to anyone who grew up in the Soviet Union. I do not think, however, that his Jewish background caused him any concrete problems. He was not a Jew with a violin or a refined intellect. Rather the opposite – a Jewish craftsman, not an unusual type in the Ukraine or in Russia. With his way of life he fully blended in with the environment and the country where he lived, but his craft was chess. He lived in the USSR practically all his life, until the moment when that country simply ceased to exist. It is not surprising that in many ways he remained a Soviet person. But he was never a Party member, although in his book he talks in stronger than ac-

ceptable terms about the advantages of the socialist system, and condemns Fischer as a typical representative of the rotten capitalist system.

In 1972 in Reykjavik, as Spassky's second, right towards the end of the hopelessly lost match against Fischer, he demanded an official inspection of the tournament hall for the purpose of discovering some secret electronic apparatus, or rays, which could be influencing Spassky's thinking. Viktor Baturinsky, who was then the chief of the chess department of the Sports Committee in the Soviet Union, recalls: 'It was Geller's personal initiative. Moscow did not give any authorisation.' One can laugh and speak ironically about this, but at the time Geller simply could not find any other reason for Spassky's weak play. This accords very well with the ideas developed in him from childhood: of the 'sealed border', the Colorado beetle scattered by the Americans on fields of collective farms, and intrigues by imperialists of every colour, demanding high vigilance and a stern rebuff. He guarded the interests of the empire, the servant and pride of which he was simultaneously.

In 1970, at the Match Soviet Union vs Rest of the World in Belgrade, he complained to journalists that wins by representatives of the Rest of the World team were being greeted with considerably greater applause than those by the Soviet grandmasters.

In an article in 64, written by him after he and I had shared first place in the Hoogovens tournament of 1977, my name was altogether absent. I do not think, however, that it was crossed out by the journal editors. Geller's self-censorship sufficed.

In 1980 in Las Palmas I asked him to sign a copy of his book on the King's Indian Defence, which had just been published. After lengthy, agonising thought, he wrote 'With best wishes', without any form of address or signature, just in case anyone should see it, and, averting his eyes, handed the book to me. But those were then the rules of the game, and he simply did not know any others.

When in the late 80s, in the final, already convulsive years of the Soviet Union, the question of the participation of Soviet players in the GMA was being discussed in the Central Chess Club in Moscow, Geller, as Psakhis recalls, was categorically against: 'It is no accident that the head office of this organisation is in Brussels, since the headquarters of NATO are also there.' But normally he was a man of few words, and therefore in obituaries in the West, while giving his outstanding chess achievements their due, they wrote at the same time about the completely unknown Geller as a person.

‘He wasn’t an eloquent speaker, rather, I would say, inarticulate’, recalls Tukmakov. Not being a stupid person, he knew this himself and preferred to hold his tongue, especially in a crowd, or in unfamiliar company.

About his character Taimanov said: ‘He could be prickly, and he could be offensive even at a team meeting. But he and I were once together on a trip for a week, and he suddenly revealed another side, warm and sincere. Of course, he was from Odessa, there was something of a dare-devil in him, something also of a common labourer with corresponding manners.’

In the words of Karpov: ‘He could play billiards for days on end. He liked playing cards and, of course, pinochle. He was from Odessa, everything about him was from Odessa, including his speech. The way that he spoke, they speak in Odessa, in Haifa, in Brighton Beach...’

For the last thirty of his allotted seventy-three years, Geller lived in Moscow, but Odessa always remained home for him. He came from an Odessa alley, where everyone knew everyone else, and knew everything about everyone else. Alburt and Tukmakov, whose chess childhood came at the end of the 50s, recall that he was a favourite son of Odessa. He was a simple man, not an intellectual and not a philosopher. He liked to eat, without paying attention to calories and cholesterol, and liked to sit in a group and drink with friends. Like a character from one of Babel’s stories, he enjoyed playing cards, dominoes, or billiards. It was all this too that made him popular in Odessa, Fima Geller from Odessa. In old age, like many others, he began to resemble a caricature of himself. His facial features became ever larger, his tendency to corpulence exceeded acceptable bounds and the considerable dimensions of his stomach, given his modest height, became even more marked. He breathed heavily, but would not part with his invariable cigarette. Both his outer appearance and his manners contrasted sharply with his pure and classical style of play.

During his chess career Geller was abroad dozens of times. ‘There he would relax’, Spassky recalls. ‘For him this meant the following: he would light up his Chesterfield, drink coca-cola and be outside of time and space.’

The last few years were not easy. It was not just his shaky health. As for many of his generation the foundations of his perception of the world had been shaken. At one time the family thought about going to America. I am not sure that, especially in his final, ailing years, he would have felt at home there. In general, old trees do not lend themselves well to transplanting. And yet, why not? Had he not been given his enormous chess talent, which made him who he became, I could well see him shuffling dominoes on a sun-drenched promenade at Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, at a table in

the Odessa Restaurant, or sitting on a bench reading the newspaper *New Russian Word*.

As a child he lived in Pushkin Street, which led to the railway station, then by the seaside. Malaya Arnautskaya, Grecheskaya, Evrejskaja and Deribasovskaya, streets of Odessa, straight as an arrow, well-trodden and familiar from his childhood and youth. He often returned to them, the last time three years before his death on his seventieth birthday. In the city which, as Babel expressed it, supplied child-prodigies to all the concert halls in the world. Here Sviatoslav Richter began, and David Oistrakh and Emil Gilels. The outstanding grandmaster Efim Petrovich Geller was the absolute favourite of Odessa, its chess king.

Fame, as is known, has only one value, to place it at the feet of those whom you love. In his case it was his family, his wife Oksana, his only son, Sasha, whom he greatly loved, and in the words of those who knew the family well, sometimes excessively. It was with him, quite a strong player, that Geller played the last two games of his life, giving his son in both games the white pieces...

All these years he lived in a dacha at Peredelkino on the outskirts of Moscow. He suffered a long and serious illness and he often sat silent, sometimes smiling a childish innocent smile. A gradual shrinking of the soul was taking place. Winter that year came early, hard and frosty. That was also how it was on the day of Geller's funeral, 20th November 1998. His grave is close to the house where he lived, the cemetery being a fifteen minutes' walk away. In a last word at his grave, David Bronstein, who knew Geller for half a century, said that all his life Geller was engaged in seeking the truth, but what truth there is in chess is elusive and illusory. All the same, day and night, he kept searching for it.

Efim Geller was one of the most striking representatives of a now departed generation, which is becoming chess history. Not far off is the time when chess itself, or at any rate the chess that they played, will also be history.

# In a Silent Way

Paul Keres

A symposium dedicated to Paul Keres was held in Estonia twice; in 2006 the symposium commemorated the 90th anniversary of the legendary grandmaster. A long list of grandmasters who had once crossed swords with Keres was invited to Tallinn, among them Yury Averbakh, Svetozar Gligoric, Anatoly Karpov, Viktor Kortchnoi, Boris Spassky and the late Wolfgang Unzicker. For several days there were numerous speeches and round-table talks full of lively discussions and anecdotes. The second symposium, in April of 2007, timed to coincide with the birthday of Keres' widow, Maria Augustovna, was of a more modest nature. Apart from several local notables, Kortchnoi, Spassky and I were the main guests to be invited back. The high point this time was a trip to Pärnu, where the young Paul attended secondary school and where there is another memorial in front of the entrance to that school. During and after these two visits to Tallinn the discussions and talks we had about Keres kept me occupied and kept me thinking about his complicated life.

Viktor Kortchnoi first visited the Estonian capital almost 60 years ago. In 1948 he shared first place with Iivo Nei in the junior championship of the USSR. Four years later he met Keres for the first time at the 20th Soviet Championship in Moscow. The young Kortchnoi, then only a master, managed to hold on for just over 20 moves.

When in 1974 Kortchnoi was facing the final Candidates' match with Karpov, the Sport Committee and the leadership of the national chess federation were completely on the side of his opponent. This preference wasn't a secret among Soviet grandmasters and only Bronstein and Keres offered their services to Kortchnoi. His reaction was remarkable. He used Bronstein's opening ideas, but he gratefully turned down Keres' offer. This is his explanation after all these years. 'My score with Paul Petrovich was 0:4, and I had the feeling that if I agreed to his help, it would be him fighting at the board, and not me. His chess authority would put too much pressure on me.'

Boris Spassky has asked himself the question why Keres didn't become world champion. He also provided the answer: 'I know from personal experience that in order to reach the top you have to think solely of the goal. You have to forget about everything else in the world, toss aside every-

thing that's unnecessary – or else you are doomed. How could Keres forget about everything else?

Indeed, how could Paul Keres forget 'about everything else'? Raised in an independent country, he had to witness how after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact Estonia was occupied by Soviet forces and formally annexed by the Soviet Union in August 1940. Subsequently, after the Germans started their Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union, Estonia was occupied by the Nazis from 1941 to 1944. And finally the country was reconquered by the Red Army in the autumn of 1944 to remain part of the Soviet Union until Estonia's independence in 1991. How could he forget 'about everything else'?

Playing in tournaments in Nazi-occupied Europe, Keres met Alekhine on several occasions. 'Do you think the Bolsheviks would dispose of me if I fell into their hands?' he once enquired of the world champion. 'You shouldn't even have any doubt', Alekhine replied, 'that they'd shorten you by a head.'

In the summer of 1944 Keres was playing in Finland. From there at the invitation of future FIDE president Rogard he went over to Sweden, where he took part in a fairly weak masters tournament, in which he lost three games. Not surprisingly: in neutral Sweden Keres tested the waters for his departure for the West – could he really think about chess here? The question – what to do? – doesn't give him any peace, and finally he makes a decision. Keres returns to Estonia to get his wife, to leave for Sweden as a group of four with their two little children.

Despite the fact that the attack by the Soviet army was very swift, around 60,000 people left Estonia. 'I didn't want to emigrate', Maria Augustovna recalls, 'I had relatives in Estonia, I'd lived here my whole life, but Paul had decided.'

They expected a boat to dock at the coast in the Haapsalu area, but the cutter from Sweden didn't arrive. Writer Frideberg Tuglas, singer Tijt Kuusik and members of the Estonian government fell into the hands of the Soviet army along with Keres. The ministers were immediately arrested and sent to Siberia, but Keres' fate also hung by a thin thread: more than once he was summoned to Pagari Street, where the NKVD (the Soviet secret service, the predecessor of the KGB – ed.) building in Tallinn was located at the time.

Yury Averbakh testifies: 'NKVD Colonel Boris Vainshtein came to Tallinn on business after ground forces had entered there and had a conversation with the head of the Estonian NKVD. At the end of the conversation the latter asked if Vainshtein, as the chairman of the Chess Section, could

resolve the issue of Keres' participation in the championship of the USSR. He suggested that Vainshtein should meet Keres, but he refused, explaining that he couldn't take on the responsibility of resolving such an issue, anyway: there was a universal arrangement – those who had been in the occupied territories during the war couldn't be allowed into the first post-war championship. 'I myself have great sympathy for him,' Vainshtein added, 'both as a chess player and as a person, although I'm not personally acquainted with him. But if we go by the book, he should be given 25 years for his collaboration with the Germans. He played in their tournaments and he consorted with Alekhine.' "

A letter that Keres wrote at the time to the chess federation of the Soviet Union was a desperate attempt to present the events of September 1944 in another light: 'The Germans tried to persuade me of the necessity of an immediate evacuation to Germany. Due to this I often had to move from place to place with my family, my wife and two little children – firstly, to escape the troublesome evacuation offers, and secondly, to create the appearance that I was preparing to leave the country. In the end I managed to escape from the enemy's approaches without any particular problems and in a quiet place.'

Keres didn't receive an answer to this letter. His title 'grandmaster of the USSR' was removed, he was banned from chess, and the future looked very bleak, but the first secretary of Estonia's Central Committee, Nikolai Karotamm, took Keres under his personal guardianship. Maria Augustovna believes that it was the protection of this man specifically that saved Paul from the repression. Evidently there, in the highest echelons of power, they also suggested that Paul should write a letter to Molotov, which he did, and he received permission to return to chess.

Of course, by comparison with the fate of many thousands of Estonians who died or were sent to Siberia, any kind of intimidation, the filling in of endless forms or difficulties with travelling abroad were minor nuisances, but Keres' life, too, was far from cloudless: the KGB didn't let him out of the sphere of their attention almost to the very end of his life.

In 1958 'work was undertaken on Keres with the plan of encouraging him to cooperate with our organs', an employee of Estonia's KGB notes in a memo that was preserved in the archives. 'In the course of this conversation it became clear that Keres does not have the desire to actively cooperate with the organs of the KGB.'

Not only Keres, but his wife, too, was under permanent observation. A

memo from 1965, extracted from the KGB archives, reads: 'A trusted person... reported that Maria Keres is a cultured, educated woman. Her character is resolute, talkative and inquisitive. It is felt that she has a high opinion of herself. The family lives very affluently. They own an American limousine. Nothing negative in Maria Keres' behaviour in day-to-day life has been observed.'

In 1967 a large delegation from the Soviet Union went to the World Expo in Montreal. Keres was in the group representing the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. In the many pages of forms that every Soviet person going abroad had to fill out, one of the most terrible questions was: do you have relatives abroad? Keres replied in the negative, and apparently the omniscient KGB never discovered the truth. When the question of accommodation was discussed, it was decided to place the Estonians in the houses of their compatriots who had lived in Canada for a long time and Keres was placed in the home... of his sister-in-law. Officially Maria Keres had only one sister, who lived in Tallinn, but in actual fact there was a second, the youngest of the Riives family. She left Estonia in 1944, got married and found herself, in the end, in Canada.

In 1969 Keres got into serious problems. When he was in Prague he had lunch with Ludek Pachman, who by that time had become a sworn enemy of the Soviet Union. This meeting became known to the KGB. They took the Estonian grandmaster directly from the airport to the Lubyanka (the KGB headquarters – ed.) and subjected him to an interrogation that was several hours long and complicated his next travels to foreign tournaments.

Keres didn't like conflicts, cliques or quarrels and he constantly had to manoeuvre within the all-embracing intrigue of the world of Soviet chess. When he went to Moscow, he always took a little notebook with him, where in calligraphic handwriting he noted who was talking with whom and who wasn't speaking to whom.

He conducted himself stoically, and it seemed that there was nothing that could shake him. Once he was supposed to fly to Australia for some simultaneous exhibitions. All the documents were already in order, the visas had been issued, the tickets had been purchased, and the route had been agreed upon. Keres arrived in Moscow from Tallinn. At the last minute the Soviet embassy in Canberra decided that Keres' visit would provoke an unnecessary stir among Estonian émigrés and they cancelled the trip. When master Beylin, who was responsible for chess on the Sport Committee at the time, set to work, stumbling, to expound to Keres on the reasons for the refusal, the latter only smiled: 'In life anything can happen.'

Despite his constant politeness and restraint, he wasn't against joking or having fun. He liked playing blitz, when he would also talk trash, having heard everything from Alexander Tolush, and from other grandmasters. In a narrow circle of friends he might recite little poems, which were sometimes also obscene. But through the affability and the smile something sad, even tragic, was always perceptible in him.

The young Dutch Slavist Karel van het Reve was in Moscow in 1948 for the world championship tournament as an interpreter for Max Euwe, and saw Keres regularly. He stood next to the Estonian grandmaster at the May Day celebration on the Kremlin rostrum, to which all the participants in the match-tournament were invited. A parade. When the T-34 tanks passed across the paving stones of Red Square with a loud noise, Van het Reve happened to glance at Keres and couldn't stop staring at his face. Recalling this episode many years later, the famous writer had difficulty conveying the whole gamut of feelings that were written on the face of the Estonian grandmaster. And only as he was returning to the hotel did Keres cleanse all the emotions from himself: 'Well, now – bridge. Bridge!' he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together.

Keres played with almost all the champions of the previous century, but his closest relations were with Euwe. He could allow himself to say more to the Dutchman than to anyone else. After Euwe sacrificed a knight to Alekhine at the Zurich tournament in 1934, the world champion took off his jacket. 'If you had sacrificed a queen, he would probably have taken off his trousers, too', Keres remarked.

Keres knew only too well how painfully the Russian champion reacted to defeats. When in a game with him at the Margate tournament Keres only raised his hand to sacrifice his queen for a forced checkmate, Alekhine got up from the table and, without uttering a word, left the tournament hall. But 20 minutes later he returned unexpectedly to analyse the game as if nothing had happened.

Keres had a gentle, idiosyncratic sense of humour. After the European Championship in Kapfenberg in 1970 the Soviet grandmasters stayed for a few days of simultaneous exhibitions in different Austrian towns. When the captain of the Soviet team sent brothers-in-alcohol Tal and Kholmov on a trip together, Keres remarked to him: 'You must be a very brave man.' And indeed, the two grandmasters didn't arrive in Vienna in time for the return trip to Moscow, 'violating the sporting regime'.

At the opening ceremony of the Piatigorsky Cup in 1963 in Los Angeles it was announced that the winner would receive a car in addition to the prize

money. Keres shared victory in the tournament with Petrosian, and they both got a car. A few months later Petrosian came to Tallinn and Keres met him at the train station. 'We really got great cars in America, Paul Petrovich,' Petrosian remarked, sitting next to Keres in the front seat. 'They're fantastic,' the Estonian grandmaster agreed, 'although if I hadn't rushed with the move h5 in our game, the car would only have gone to me.'

During the championship of the Soviet Union in 1940 in Moscow Keres could hardly speak Russian, communicating via an interpreter and commenting for the game's spectators in German, his strongest foreign language. After the war he got his Russian up to scratch, but he had to learn more than the language. Plunged into an atmosphere of doublethink, suspicion and mistrust, he learnt to sense many other things that people who were born in the Soviet Union understood without any explanation and that the people of the West couldn't understand, no matter how hard they tried. He had to live in a society with another frame of reference and with values that were so different from those he was used to in the first half of his life.

For Soviet grandmasters he always remained something of a foreigner. And it wasn't even because of his slight accent: his entire personality – his manners, his knowledge of languages, tennis and bridge, his elegantly tied necktie, his good grooming, his politeness and his imperturbability distinguished him from those whom they met in the corridors of Dinamo, Trud or Lokomotiv, or in the Sport Committee, and finally just in everyday life.

They imitated many things that he did. If Botvinnik was buying an oil burner for his dacha then it absolutely had to be a Swedish make, only Swedish – that's what Keres advised! In his memoirs Botvinnik writes that when playing with Keres in a foreign tournament, he went for a walk with him on a hot summer's day. '(When) Paul suggested drinking something refreshing, this first elicited shock: "But that costs money! When I'm abroad I become a skinflint." "But it's so nice to spend money", Paul argued and... he treated me! These instructions of his were followed steadfastly.'

He learned from Keres. They all learned from Keres. Botvinnik writes about 'my friend Paul' very favourably, but he admits that 'sometimes our rivalry took unnecessarily sharp forms, as it was in 1948 and in 1952. Alas, you can't throw the words out of a song! By an unspoken agreement we never recalled our unpleasant squabbles in our conversations and afterwards we became friends.'

When he arrived in Moscow for his debut in the 1940 Soviet Championship, Keres was greeted enthusiastically and during the opening ceremony the most prolonged applause was given to the new Soviet citizen. Keres' external appearance – a dark grey pinstriped suit, a watch chain on his belt, a handkerchief in his jacket pocket, a sharply-defined parting, his manners – it all contrasted with the uniformity that reigned in Soviet Russia in those days. Keres' style, too, was no less noteworthy – sharp, combi-national, a passion for the King's Gambit, which looked almost defiant, especially against the background of the particularly positional manoeuvres of Botvinnik's game.

A new favourite of the public had appeared, and this, of course, could not fail to irritate the leader of Soviet chess, especially as there was a question on the agenda: who should play a match with Alekhine for the title of world champion? Botvinnik even got angry when Sergey Prokofiev applauded too loudly after Keres' first victory and he managed to obtain a ban on applause in the playing hall.

In December 1945 Keres and his wife were in Moscow and Botvinnik invited them to his home for lunch, along with Flohr and Lilienthal. 'I knew that Paul and Botvinnik weren't overfond of each other, but externally there was no suggestion of this,' says Maria Keres. 'The lunch was superb and everyone observed the proprieties, but when the conversation turned to Alekhine, Botvinnik immediately said that he wouldn't offer his hand to such a person. He meant Paul, of course.'

But just a few months later Botvinnik began preparing for a World Championship match with Alekhine. A document with his requests, consisting of 49 points, was preserved in the archives, and it was read out by the organiser of one of the round tables, the Estonian writer and keen chess fan Ülo Tuulik.

Among other points in Botvinnik's letter are mentioned:

Arrival 4 days before the start of the match.

A car with a chauffeur.

In addition to the vouchers for food:

2 kg of butter, 1.5 kg of caviar, 2 kg of chocolate, 5 kg of fruit.

1 summer suit, 2 evening suits, 1 hat, 1 winter coat, 1 summer coat, 2 pairs of shoes, 4 starched shirts, 4 casual shirts.

For Ragozin (his second – ed.): 3 weeks' holiday in a guest-house, 1 month in a sanatorium.

A flat, paid time-off, security.

For my mother: The Kremlin hospital, neurological care.

For my wife: Holiday from the Bolshoi Theatre (Botvinnik's wife was a ballet

dancer – ed.) with no salary deductions.

Light overcoat, 1 set of evening attire, 4 sets of daytime attire, a fur coat, linen.

Clothes for the child. Etc. etc.

But the most important item was the demand for a closed training match with Keres. Because the Estonian grandmaster himself was considered a candidate for the World Championship, and in this case he would be forced to give up his own claims to the top title. However, the death of Alekhine cancelled all these plans and freed Keres from a humiliating match, as it was decided that the vacant title would be contested in the world championship tournament in The Hague and Moscow in 1948.

Maria Keres recalls how on the train from Moscow to The Hague, where the first half of the match-tournament was to be played, Botvinnik emphatically avoided all contact with the other participants and their seconds. With his own second Ragozin he communicated as if with a servant. He also talked to his wife and small daughter as if he was giving commands, generally trying not to come out of the compartment they occupied.

Despite Botvinnik's special position, officially three equal representatives of the Soviet Union were sent to The Hague: Botvinnik, Smyslov and Keres. This was how they were presented in rhyme in *Sovietsky Sport*:

In chess the player isn't full of brio  
Friends, I ask you, lend a hand –  
Transport the fearsome Russian trio  
Across the chess fields of Holland!  
Words caught in a metaphor's throes  
I see as if I've run to battles' ends  
Not Vasnetsov's<sup>1</sup>, but still, three heroes  
Three heroes whom I call my friends  
One more comparison, number three  
(This is what makes a man a poet)  
At the station I shall await thee  
As the masters of victory are met!

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1 Viktor Vasnetsov (1848-1926) was a Russian artist who specialized in mythological and historical subjects

Today the lines written about the 'fearsome Russian trio' – Botvinnik, Keres and Smyslov – read like a parody, but how did they sound in 1948?

After the half of the competition that took place in The Hague, the accent obviously shifted. Now these verses appeared in the biggest Soviet sports paper.

Everything is going just as planned  
Let the world be not impatient  
While he comes back to our homeland  
From the Holland tournament  
The games were very combative  
And rumours have begun to blow  
About some harsh competitive  
Encounters in the city of Moscow  
But for now all the applause  
From the world is for one great man  
Who is leading with few flaws  
As he should, and as he can.

As he should. This was exactly how Botvinnik's lead in the tournament was perceived in the Soviet Union. In a friendly cartoon Botvinnik was depicted striding confidently, carrying a flag, on which the number of points he had scored – 6 – was posted, and behind him with little flags with the number 4 on them came Smyslov and Keres, and bringing up the rear the foreigners were hobbling along: Reshevsky with 4½(!) points and Euwe with 1½.

The range of rumours connected with the 1948 match-tournament was very wide. Some asserted that Keres had been forced to lose deliberately to the future champion, and others talked of Botvinnik giving away the last game to Keres intentionally, so as to push away Reshevsky. In fact in that game Botvinnik had already offered a draw in the opening, which Keres declined. When Botvinnik repeated the offer a few moves later, Keres replied by swearing rudely, making Botvinnik turn red. 'Possibly that wasn't too classy on my part', Keres admitted many years later.

Before this last game Botvinnik noted in his diary, which he kept scrupulously during the tournament: 'If there is no advantage by the 20th move, then offer a draw. In the case of a refusal try to thrash him! Onward, to Keres!'

He also made similar notes before the other games with the Estonian grandmaster, always adding the enigmatic phrase: ‘Remember who you’re playing!’ What did Botvinnik mean by this? Was he referring to his opponent’s wartime past? His playing strength? Or – on the contrary – his weakness? Or the importance of beating Keres in particular?

The late David Bronstein recalled: ‘In the 1948 match-tournament everything was done for Botvinnik, as it was known that he couldn’t hold on for more than 15 consecutive games. It was simply a parody of a tournament – with a two-week break between The Hague and Moscow. I asked Keres at the time, “Paul Petrovich, how could you allow such a thing back then?” He threw me such a look that I immediately stopped short – “I’ll take, take my question back” ’

Bronstein and Keres had a unique relationship. In the 1951 World Championship match against Botvinnik, the Estonian grandmaster was on the side of Bronstein, the challenger, and met him in Moscow. They played numerous tournament games, they corresponded all their lives, and when they were training together they constantly played blitz and sometimes thematic matches. The opening? The King’s Gambit!

What made them so close, being so different in character, upbringing and temperament? A love of chess? Devotion to the game? Without doubt. But not only that. I think that besides this they both had the same wound and the same shared pain: the championship title which they hadn’t won.

About 15 years ago, when Botvinnik was still alive, the question arose again of whether he had a hand in Keres’ non-participation in the extremely strong post-war tournament in Groningen in 1946. Maria Keres decisively refuted the contradictory opinion, that Botvinnik possibly supported Keres’ efforts to play in the tournament, saying that it could only have been the other way around.

During the championship of the Soviet Union in Leningrad in 1947 a group of players signed a collective letter in which Keres was branded a ‘collaborator’ and a ‘fascist’, and only out of malice master Klamann tossed out a phrase after a win against the Estonian grandmaster: ‘Well, guys, I’ve bumped off a fascist!’

Botvinnik himself insisted that he was ‘above all this nonsense’, adding that perhaps he did sign the collective letter from the grandmasters, but he never personally spoke out against the Estonian grandmaster and never plotted against him. That this was really beneath the dignity of a chess player, who should only fight at the chess board.

Everyone who knew Botvinnik well could confirm that this was a man of firm principles and convictions, and that such stories about him were based on misunderstandings. On not knowing him and hence – on a failure to understand him. But also: this was a man who from his youth had been striving to do whatever it took to fulfil his duty and who had set himself a lofty goal. And this goal was to bring the title of world chess champion to his motherland.

On the way to this goal Botvinnik had to act with complete decisiveness, because ‘the conditions in which people act, change. They vanish into history, but the genuine achievements remain,’ as he said himself.

The last time Keres met Botvinnik was at the Wijk aan Zee tournament in 1969. That winter was particularly windy, and both grandmasters played with colds for almost the entire tournament. Mikhail Botvinnik recalls: ‘I’m lying in bed, analysing the adjourned position against Portisch on a pocket chess set – a difficult endgame... Unexpectedly there is a knock on the door and Paul comes in: “So, can you save it?” I explain that after a long search I’ve found one unique drawn position, but how to obtain it – I can’t work it out. Keres took my pocket chess set, thought for a while and, giving the chess set back, said: “Well, what if you play like this?” We looked at each other and were overcome with uncontrollable laughter – Paul had found a simple way of obtaining the position I was looking for. When we resumed play Portisch was stunned – a draw!’

This game was played in one of the last rounds and its result was extraordinarily important for the final distribution of places. If Portisch had won, the Hungarian grandmaster, and not Botvinnik, would have occupied the first line on the table, or rather shared it with Geller and Keres(!) When Kortchnoi heard this story he remarked gloomily, ‘I wouldn’t have done that.’

That story had a continuation. A month after the tournament ended, Maria Keres unexpectedly received a small parcel from Moscow, which contained a bottle of French perfume. Attached to the parcel there was a note from Botvinnik that talked about the ending of some game. ‘I didn’t understand anything, but Paul laughed a lot,’ Maria Augustovna recalled.

In his last years, when he was in Moscow, Keres telephoned Botvinnik and visited him at home. The reasons for their confrontations had evaporated, and Keres discovered another Botvinnik, one who was considerate

and kind. In the late sixties, visiting him at his dacha, Keres remarked: 'Botvinnik isn't such a bad person after all, he's nice, friendly.' 'He forgot everything, Paul forgot everything,' Maria Keres sighed.

Keres understood very well all the burdens and difficulties of professional chess players, especially his 'little brothers', and he always defended their interests. This is a quality that is a collective characteristic of far from all world champions. World champions? But Keres never became one. Could he have?

How would his career have turned out if the boat from Sweden had arrived in time in September 1944 and he had found himself in the free world? A hypothetical question, of course. Kortchnoi believes that Keres would have won the top chess title. He himself didn't manage it because he was late in deciding his own fate by a good 10 years: in 1976 Kortchnoi was already 45, but in 1944 Keres wasn't even 30.

Keres' widow Maria Augustovna didn't share Kortchnoi's point of view, remarking: 'I think that he still wouldn't have made it,' basing her opinion on the fact that Keres wasn't as merciless towards himself or to others, either, as Botvinnik was.

Could Botvinnik have imagined himself being late for a round, turning up for the game with a tennis racquet under his arm or playing a rubber of bridge while ignoring the fact that his clock was running, as Keres did in his younger years? Or carelessly analysing an adjourned game because he wanted to spend an evening with friends who had arrived from Tallinn? This did happen with Keres when at the AVRO tournament in Amsterdam in an extremely important game with Alekhine he ended up with half a point instead of an elementary win.

Keres was from a family with longevity: his father and mother reached old age and his brother Harald, a well-known physicist and academic, was, at 95, prospering in Tallinn when the second symposium was held in 2007. Paul Keres died without reaching the age of 60. Which is to say that the hard, stressful work of the professional chess player doesn't contribute to longevity, even if you participate in physical sport and lead a healthy lifestyle.

Although Keres himself didn't like to expand on this topic, already by the time of the 1961 Zurich tournament he was taking medicine for high blood pressure, and in his later years the doctors insistently demanded that he give up practical play. The problem with his blood circulation was chronic, and he appeared on stage as always, flawlessly dressed, in an

evening suit with a tie and... in slippers: his feet hurt, the gout made it self felt.

Understandably, the simultaneous exhibitions that he gave until the end of his life were also contra-indicated for him, especially if it was two in one day, as happened in Vancouver literally a week before his death in 1975. It's easy to give advice: when could he next imagine an opportunity to earn some foreign currency? In recent years he had been getting permission for only one foreign tournament a year.

Keres took a complicated route from Vancouver to Tallinn – via Montreal, Amsterdam and Helsinki. He had a hobby: connecting planes from different international airlines – the flight numbers, the cheapest routes – he knew it all by heart. In a narrow circle of colleagues he allowed himself to joke: 'All the difficulties will fade as soon as you break away from Aeroflot.'

It's pleasant to think that such a hobby suited Keres' personality and way of thinking – his keenness on analysis, accuracy, and his efforts to find the most elegant solution. Perhaps. It seems to me that there is also another explanation: creating international routes, he returned to those days when, without having to report to anyone, he could decide how he would travel to Stockholm, Munich, Amsterdam or Helsinki and how much time he would spend abroad.

From Schiphol Paul called his old friend Max, who came to the airport, and he and Euwe talked for a few hours. Hans Bouwmeester, who was present during their last conversation, recalls that Keres repeated several times: 'Yes, I'm in trouble with Baturinsky now, I stayed in Canada for several days without permission.' Keres died of a heart attack in Helsinki.

When he died, Ivonin, the deputy chairman of the USSR Sport Committee, responsible for chess, invited Yakov Neishtadt to see him. 'Yakov Isaevich, what material are you planning to publish about Keres?' he asked the editor-in-chief of 64. 'A detailed obituary, his best games, everything that such a great chess player deserves,' Neishtadt replied. 'That's very good, of course, but I would like you not to forget,' the bureaucrat said, looking him straight in the eye, 'that the death of Keres is, primarily, a loss for Estonia, and not for the Soviet Union.'

That was how Keres was viewed in Moscow throughout his whole career, and that was how the attitude towards him remained after his death, too. He was both their own, and a foreigner in a huge country that no longer exists, and the authorities never forgot that. He didn't forget it either.

The speaker of the Estonian parliament, Ene Ergma, said at the sympo-

sium in 2006: 'Paul Keres didn't give in to one of the main desires of all totalitarian systems – to level society, to force all people to talk identically and to dress identically, to suffer identically and to lie identically. The elegant Keres in the grey period of Stalinism constantly reminded us here, in Estonia, of what we would definitely bring back one day.'

# I Knew Capablanca...

In 1989 in the Spanish town of Murcia I was chatting with a young player from the Soviet Union. 'You once saw Levenfish?' he asked in surprise. 'And did you also see Schiffers?' He asked this so sincerely that to this day I am not sure whether he was joking, since the young have their own impression of time, which is defined by a capacious phrase: long ago. After thinking briefly, I replied that I had not known Schiffers, who died in 1904. I also did not know Capablanca, who died a year before I was born, but in a way I have seen him close to, his habits, his way of speaking and dressing, of playing bridge, and of staying silent.

In 1984 in New York I met for the first time with Capablanca's widow, Olga Clark. And now, examining the notes of those years, hearing her voice recorded on tape, and travelling back in time, I see people who have long been gone, and in particular Capablanca himself. The more that I immersed myself ever more deeply in the atmosphere of that time and in his life, there increasingly came to mind a thought, similar to that expressed by Reagan at one of the Republican Party Conventions: 'Democrats often like to quote Jefferson. I *knew* Jefferson...'

I made the acquaintance of Olga on 6th May 1984 in the Manhattan Chess Club, which was then housed on the tenth floor of Carnegie Hall. That day, as she had already done many times, she was presenting to the club something out of Capablanca's personal effects. I saw a very elderly woman, of American-style indeterminate age, with permed hair, strong traces of cosmetics on her face, and sparkling rings on fingers touched by the pigmentation of old age. We introduced ourselves, and I gave my name. 'Sorry, what did you say', she asked me again. 'Znosko? Znosko?...' I again repeated my name. 'Sorry', she said, smiling. 'I've never heard of you. But did you know Znosko-Borovsky?' He was a friend of Capablanca, and we often used to meet him in Paris.'

After the initial words of acquaintance we switched to Russian, and later we would always speak in this language. She was Russian by birth, spoke the language quite well, and had even published a collection of poems,

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1 E.A. Znosko-Borovsky (1884-1954) Russian chess player and journalist.

Emigrated to France in 1917.

which, however, were very feeble. Occasionally in her speech she would insert French sayings and words, and more rarely anglicisms, although her speech was free of words such as 'appointment' or 'experience' with Russian endings attached, which one so often encounters in the language of the latest emigration of Russian Americans. Sometimes she would openly ask: 'How do you say this in Russian?' She was called Olga Clark – Clark being the surname of her last husband. She readily agreed to a meeting and dinner the following evening in the Russian Tea Room.

Precisely at four I was standing at the door of an enormous house on the corner of 68th Street and Park Avenue, a highly prestigious region of Manhattan. 'Who would you like to see?' asked a porter in livery. 'Ah, Mrs Clark? Bill, would you please show this gentleman up to the seventh floor.'

She was already standing by an outside door. 'Come in please. I'm sorry, you have a very difficult surname, I've forgotten it.' Within a short time we began addressing each other by our first names. Having the alternatives: Mrs Clark, which somehow did not fit with the topic of our conversation, Madame, which for some reason I did not try, Mrs Capablanca-Clark, which sounded rather clumsy, and the altogether Russian Olga Evgenyevna, I settled, with her permission, on Olga, remembering the young Van der Wiel, who to my surprise called the 75-year-old Euwe simply Max, and explained to me: 'He enjoys it, otherwise it's always yes Mr Euwe, no Mr Euwe...'

We settled down in the lounge. The windows were slightly open, and the noise of cars carried up from Park Avenue as is recorded on my tape. 'What shall we drink?' she asked. Beside the divan stood a drinks trolley, but on seeing my wandering gaze, she herself suggested: 'Champagne, perhaps? Let's call Bill, he'll open a bottle for us.'

'Well now, what did you want to ask me about Capablanca? Yes, you may record it on tape.'

In our conversations she always called him Capablanca, or Capa, but never Raúl or Jose, forms of address which often occurred in letters to him, which she bequeathed to the Manhattan Chess Club. As did many personal forms, for example, in Spanish 'Mi querido Capablanca', or strictly official ones, listing all his titles, or the gentle 'My dear Capablanca', Euwe's invariable form of address.

I did not venture to ask about her age, although it was evident that she had long since reached that age when one takes pride in one's years, rather than hides them. It used to be thought that she had been born in 1900. It was only after her death that I learned the exact date of her birth. Olga

Evgenyevna Chubarova was born in the Caucasus on 23 September 1898. At the time of our meeting she was not far short of eighty-six years old.

'My first husband's surname was Chagodaev. He was an officer in the White Army, a cavalryman. Altogether I have been married four times. My last husband was Admiral Clark. He was a remarkable man. Before him I was married to a man who was much younger than me, an Olympic Champion at, how do you say it in Russian – rowing? Practically everything that I have now came from him, but I'd rather not talk about that.' In our conversation she should occasionally make use of this formula, and I, naturally, never insisted.

'Well, and, of course, Capablanca. What can I tell you about him? When did we meet? It was exactly fifty years ago, here in New York, in the Spring of 1934. There was some party at the house of the Cuban Consul. I was unwell and looked awful, but my sister simply dragged me there. Ah, you know, New York was different then, lively and altogether... You probably don't know that it was I, not Marlene Dietrich, who brought the black veil into fashion. However, what significance does all that have now.' She sighed: 'Do you see? That's me.' Looking at me from the opposite wall was a dazzling beauty – a blonde with dark-brown eyes. 'Well, of course, I recognised you straight away.' 'Ah, dushka', her knobbly hand touched mine. Later too she would occasionally call me by this Russian word, hard to translate, the overtones of which can be found in the English word 'darling'.

'So, it was at this party that I met Capablanca. What was he like? You must understand, he was a king. And in every way he conducted himself like a king. When before some simultaneous display someone asked them to point out Capablanca, they said to him: 'When they all enter the hall, you yourself will see who is Capablanca.' In Belgium Capablanca was at a diplomatic reception, and, being a diplomat, he had to be presented to the Belgian King. A minister later told me that, when the King heard Capablanca's name, he ran up to Capa like a child, which was contrary to all protocol. The King showered him with compliments: 'I know your games, and now, what an honour, I am seeing you in person.' He was liked by everyone, and he had good relations with everyone, except, of course, Alekhine. I first saw Alekhine somewhere near Carlsbad, I think it was in '36. It was summer, and there was some party in a garden. I was talking with Stahlberg, who Capa had just introduced me to, but a few minutes later we were approached by some man with dishevelled hair, who looked like a shop salesman. It was Alekhine. Was he attractive? On

the contrary, he was rather unsavoury. I immediately recognised him from photographs, Capablanca's sworn enemy, and I froze on the spot. He introduced himself: 'I am Alekhine.' 'You must excuse us', he said to Stahlberg, 'I have to say something private to Madame.' Alekhine took me to the end of the garden – I can still see the tomato beds along which we walked – and he began speaking very determinedly. He said that Capablanca can think what he likes about him, but in company they must greet each other. That Capablanca did not even bow to him, and so on. 'Evidently', I replied, 'Capablanca has strong reasons for this.' 'Perhaps', said Alekhine, 'but the whole world understands that, although I lost the match to Euwe and he is now the official World Champion, it is myself and Capablanca who are the strongest players.' 'Capablanca and you', I said, 'and you know this, and that is why you do not give Capablanca a return match.' He looked at me strangely and continued: 'I was not altogether well during my match with Euwe, but I can assure you that...' Again I interrupted him: 'Just as Capablanca was not well, when he gave up his title to you in 1927 in Buenos Aires.' 'C'est impossible de parler avec vous. Vous êtes une tigresse', said Alekhine, and I never again spoke to him. Yes, in French. In French and in Russian. We switched from one language to the other, and rushed along the beds, shouting at each other. 'Do you know', I said to Capablanca when I came back, 'Alekhine has just called me a tigress', and I retold the whole conversation to him. 'Ah, you are my tigress', Capa said, and he kissed my hand. Later I told him all this again. He did not want to miss a single detail. When I arrived in Nottingham, that day Capa won against Alekhine and was happy. It was there that he asked me what impression Alekhine made on me. 'It seems to me', I said, 'that if you were to pinch him, he would squeal, whereas another man would roar.' 'You are indeed a little tigress', Capa said. There in Nottingham he said to me: 'I hate Alekhine.'

'We spoke almost always in French, and we only swore at each other in English, but we did this quite often, because I was always late. Capa spoke both French and English wonderfully. Did he speak Russian? He knew a few words, but I will not tell you which.' A smile appeared on her face, but even looking more closely it was not easy to recognise in her the beauty with the flaxen hair, who with her bewitching smile was still looking at us. At this moment a man of close on sixty came into the room. 'This is my friend', said Olga. We introduced ourselves, and said a few appropriate words. He asked how long I would be staying in New York and

the three of us drank champagne together. A few minutes later he asked us to excuse him and bowed. 'The Baron is a very decent man, although he is of German origin', said Olga, once again switching to Russian when he had left.

'Well now, what else can I tell you about Capablanca. Once in Paris, in the Regina Hotel, Tartakower came to visit us. I was unwell and was in bed. Tartakower was very nice, and Capa greatly valued his opinions. So there they were sitting by my bed, when Tartakower suddenly said: 'Why don't we have a game of chess?' Here I should say that Capa never played chess privately – how do you say in Russian? – at home? At least that was the case when I was there, but I do not think that even in his youth he ever played privately. But here Capa agreed, and he recorded this game. He won, then folded the sheet, handed it to me, and said: 'This is for you. Some day this will be a beautiful diamond.' 'How do you mean?' I asked. 'This is how. Since the time that I was a child, my slightest movement has been recorded, represented or advertised, but no one has seen this game.' I had forgotten about this, but recently I was looking for something for the Capablanca Museum in the Manhattan Club when I came across it. But I gave them something else and I kept it. Now I want to sell it. For what amount? I think ten thousand dollars. I see big money being paid for type-scripts and manuscripts. And you know this is a very rare thing. Like a new Mozart symphony. What do you think? They begged me from Cuba for part of the Capablanca archives, but I never even replied to them.

'No, I did not know Nimzowitsch and Rubinstein, they were before my time, but Lasker I remember very well. He conducted himself with the dignity of an old lion. Botvinnik and his wife behaved modestly and kept rather aloof. Capa was on good terms with them and forecast that some day Botvinnik would become World Champion. Yes, of course, I also remember Euwe very well. He was an impeccable gentleman, but somehow rather insipid.

'Savielly Tartakower was our friend. Yes, I used to speak with him in Russian, but when the three of us were together, we spoke in French, of course. In appearance he was unattractive: long nose, round face and bald, but infinitely charming, sincere and generous. But most of all Capa was disposed to English people. He was an anglophile. Doctor Tylor, who could hardly see anything, but possessed an amazing wit and impeccable manners, Alexander – young, handsome, enthusiastic – I remember them very well. But most of all Capablanca was disposed to Sir George Thomas. It can be said that they were close friends, although it was a very special friend-

ship. They would sit in silence, only occasionally exchanging the odd remark. This surprised me, but both of them seemed very content with each other. On the whole Sir George spoke little with anyone, apart from Capablanca. He was very well educated, and spoke with a slow dignity. In general, in his behaviour and manners Capablanca belonged to the English upper classes. And what is characteristic, is that he was completely indifferent to his fame. Later in his papers I found invitations to highly prestigious English houses, highly prestigious. On the whole he was an introvert, although sometimes he liked to have people around him, but only sometimes. By nature he was taciturn, and back home in Havana they said that the young Raúl thought that he had gold in his mouth, which he was afraid of squandering. But when he flew into a rage, it was like a hurricane, although he would calm down fairly quickly, and then he would say: 'It must be difficult for you living with a man of such a character as mine, but that is the way I am.' The greatest compliment I received from him was when he once said: 'You know, I am so sick and tired of all this, that I must go away immediately somewhere into the mountains, with no one around.' I replied: 'I'll go and pack your suitcase', and I quickly got things ready. He asked 'But where is yours?' 'But you wanted to go away on your own.' 'No, Kikiriki, you are part of me. I meant that there should be only you and me.' He sometimes called me this, Kikiriki, an amusing nickname, taken from a French song. That was how in my childhood back in Tiflis my governess called me. I am, after all, the great-granddaughter of Evdokimov, the famous conqueror of the Caucasus, subjugator of Shamil. In our family all the male line were soldiers.

'Capa could spend hours reading books on military strategy. But even so, his favourite reading, apart from detective stories, was books on history and philosophy. He never read – how do you say in Russian? – fiction. Before a game he would most often read. No, he never took a nap. No, what do you mean, you haven't tired me out at all. Perhaps another bottle? Go on, I'll call Bill...'

We went out into the corridor. On the wall directly opposite the lounge hung a picture of some people in naval uniform. 'That is my last husband, Admiral Clark', said Olga, pointing to one of them. 'He was a war hero and a friend of MacArthur. You will have heard the name of Admiral Clark?' I made a gesture which could be interpreted in various ways. More than anything it approached the biblical 'Thou sayest it'.

'Come on, I'll show you something else.' We went quite a considerable distance down the corridor and stopped by an open door. At the back of the room sat a very big man, who was eating something and reading a paper. I instinctively took a step back. 'You can speak loudly, he won't hear anything. This is Fish, Congressman Hamilton Fish. He is ninety-six, and was named in honour of Alexander Hamilton. That is his grandfather sitting on the knee of George Washington.' She pointed at a picture hanging on the wall, in the centre of which, on the knee of a person with a face familiar from its depiction on the dollar note, sat a little boy. I imperceptibly leaned my arm against the door-post. The champagne in combination with this live excursion into the history of the United States was having its effect. 'You know, he is a terrible miser, although his family is one of the oldest and richest in America, older than the Rockefellers and the Carnegies. He used to be very strong, and in 1914 was judged the best player in American football.'

The man did not pay any attention to us and turned over the page of his newspaper. 'He married my sister, and I married Admiral Clark, and we bought this apartment. Effectively there are two apartments, joined by a corridor. He has a little dog and I have a cat. You know, Capa loved cats, and in the last years we had a wonderful cat, which he often used to play with.' There involuntarily came to mind Alekhine's Siamese beauty with the nickname 'Chess', but I had the sense to keep silent, realising the inappropriateness of such a remark. 'And so he and I live together, like cat and dog', sighed Olga.

I learned later that Congressman Fish had been a prominent figure in American politics over a long period of time. He was remembered, among other things, for a fierce clash with President Roosevelt. A staunch Republican, he lived to the age of 101, and just a few days before his death he made a passionate speech against his own grandson, who was standing for Congress for the Democratic Party. A few years before his death he married a woman of just over fifty. It need hardly be said that this fact in no way improved the relations between Olga and the Congressman. For every year that they lived together, his wife received, according to Olga, a million dollars. His act was also greeted without enthusiasm by the Congressman's children, although, again according to Olga, his estate could in no way have suffered from this good-for-nothing.

A few minutes later in the lounge Bill opened a new bottle of champagne. 'Santé', I said. She raised her glass. 'A la bonne vôtre. Now, where did we

get to?’ ‘Did he like alcohol?’, I asked, not altogether appropriately. ‘Champagne, or if wine, then a little and definitely only good wine. It was only after I met him that I began to understand wine. He was a gourmet. He only ate a little, and when they brought large portions he waved his hands, but everything definitely had to be of excellent quality. On occasions he would send a dish back, but he was forgiven for everything, as everyone liked him. Sometimes he himself would prepare something from a Cuban recipe, and he was good at this, provided, of course, that it didn’t get burnt. I myself always used to squeeze orange juice for him. It had to be through a linen cloth, in case, God forbid, anything should fall into the glass – for he was very capricious.

‘He was generous, and he liked to entertain friends, for that is how we lived: live now and pay later. Regarding his clothes he was the same. He had few things, but everything that he had was of the very best quality. He was always splendidly dressed. Even the English newspapers wrote about this: the most elegantly dressed chess player. But he used to dress, how do you say in Russian, sober? Classically? Severely? Perhaps. That was his taste. He always ordered his suits from one and the same tailor on Savile Row for many years, and sometimes he would make purchases on Bond Street. Ties were his weakness, and he himself used to tie them very carefully. He especially liked one tie that I gave him as a present. No, he was not superstitious, although he used to wear it for important games.

‘That’s the way he was about everything, you understand. He was a perfectionist. He was an excellent tennis player, and his trainer said that if he had played seriously, he could have been one of the best. He was a simply splendid driver; he called for me in his car the evening after we had first met. He very much liked playing billiards, and I heard that if he had devoted more time to billiards, he could have become a champion. I know that when he was young and was studying at Columbia University, he was invited to play in the main baseball league, but that was before my time. Well, and, of course, bridge. He was an excellent player, and even champions came to him for advice. I was a much weaker player, roughly the same as Keres, but Vera Menchik played very well. I remember her, we used to speak in Russian. And one more thing: he was extraordinarily proud – it was in his blood. I only once saw him shower someone with compliments. It was an old, roguish florist in Havana. He sold us some flowers that were not fresh, and I got very angry and protested. And Capa apologised profusely and bowed to him, like I had never seen. Yes, an old, toothless Cuban florist...

‘When we visited Cuba, we always stayed at the same hotel, because the owner was a friend of Capa. Cuba was then a delightful country, lively, with frequent carnivals, dances, music, a mass of flowers, and there was altogether no poverty. Capa liked being there, but not for too long. In general he was restless, he liked to travel – it was in his blood. London, of course, was his city. He liked England most of all, but there was also Paris, Paris... I recall that in Paris in 1937 there was a reception at the Cuban Consulate in honour of Von Ribbentrop. He was a very charming man, and he danced with me all evening. At the end he invited me to Germany. ‘But I am a Slav, and after all you don’t much like Slavs. Besides, you already have Olga Chekhova’, I said. He paid me a shower of compliments, said that if the Führer were to see me, he would without fail fall in love and I would be queen of Germany. ‘Why should I want to be queen of Germany’, I replied, ‘when I am now queen of the world.’ Capa, who was standing alongside, beamed all over his face.

‘Yes, of course, I remember Amsterdam. There was the hotel on the water-front, yes, yes, the Amstel. I also remember the seagulls over the water. But you know, Capa should never have played in that tournament. He was not at all prepared for it, he had private problems, with his divorce. And the main thing – he was ill, very ill. He had enormous fluctuations in his blood pressure, which would sometimes rise terribly high. It ran in their family. His father died from it, as did his son recently in Cuba. During the game with Botvinnik at the end of the tournament he felt unwell. Later he told me that in the toilet he had nearly lost consciousness. His Doctor Gomez strongly advised him against playing in that tournament, since Capa should have avoided the slightest excitement. But at the time I could not even imagine how serious it was.’

‘Why did he like Russia? Because there were good players there, and also because there he was simply worshipped. They made a great fuss of him. No, I didn’t go myself, although Krylenko gave permission, but I was advised, it was hinted, that it would be better not to go.

‘If he saw some injustice, he would say so right to the person’s face, but in a book recently published in Cuba it is said that he fought for the rights of negroes and that sort of thing. He was always in favour of justice, but that did not interest him at all. He himself would say in this case – *ça pue* – How is this in Russian? It stinks? Perhaps even stronger.

‘He adored music, Mozart and Beethoven, and especially Bach. We used to go to concerts. He also liked chamber music. You say that he was

friendly with Prokofiev? Perhaps. We met several times in Paris, but I did not like him very much, nor, I think, did he like me. In some way he reminded me of Alekhine.'

'Do you believe in reincarnation?' she suddenly asked me. I again made a gesture which could be interpreted in various ways. 'You know, many considered that Capablanca was the reincarnation of Morphy. After all, they were similar in many ways: in the placing of the head and in general appearance, and both were of Latin origin. Capablanca was born four years after the death of Morphy...'

'No, no, what do you mean? You haven't tired me at all.' The bottle was nearly empty, and the evening had already set in. 'Let's call a taxi. In the meantime I'll get myself ready', she said.

I waited in the hall. Suddenly Olga appeared in a wonderful black dress, such that I even felt embarrassed about my Amsterdam appearance. 'I remember in Nottingham at the closing ceremony I also had a black dress with frills. Capa never even guessed that I had bought it in a sale. There were other things that he did not guess. He was always driving around in his car, whereas I often went by the metro, sometimes even second class. Dushka, could you help me with this chain?'

It was no distance at all to the restaurant, but, as often happens in Manhattan, the taxi moved very slowly, often stopping altogether in a line of similar yellow cars. At the door of the Russian Tea Room Olga said: 'We used to come here often, nearly every day, for lunch, since we lived almost opposite, in house No.157, here on 57th Street. In the end New York became his home. Although we always travelled in luxury cabins on ships and all that, I said – you know, I would like to have my own flat in New York, even if only a small one. I rented an inexpensive flat. We paid something of the order of one hundred dollars a month. And I myself furnished it, with the furniture that you have just seen in my present place. At that time I bought a lot of things second-hand. When Capa entered the flat for the first time, he was simply dumbfounded. He immediately phoned a friend and said: come at once and see what an apartment Olga has prepared for me. But he lived here, unfortunately, only for a very short time. From here he went almost every day to the Manhattan Chess Club to play bridge. That was also the case on the last day. He was taken to hospital already unconscious. I will never forget that day. I was standing at the corner of the street, not far from the hospital. It was evening or night, I no longer remember, and I saw a star. Suddenly it disappeared – and I realised that he

was no longer. A few minutes later a doctor came out and said that he had just died.'

We entered the restaurant and she said: 'Here it has all been re-organised, but we usually sat in that corner.' The waiter brought the menu. After living for many years in Amsterdam opposite De Kersentuin (The Cherry Orchard) restaurant, with dishes of the type 'sturgeon on a spit, as Anton Pavlovich Chekhov liked to eat', here it was hard to surprise me with anything. Genuine Russian food could then be found only in little restaurants in Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, but for Olga, New York was limited, of course, to Manhattan alone. Russians, especially those she would have met in Brighton, would hardly have fitted with her image of Russia, especially the Russia that she had left nearly seventy years earlier.

'You know', she said, 'I effectively did not know Russia, since I am from Tiflis, from the Caucasus. That was a totally different Russia. Capa and I never discussed politics, but I have heard that now they have a different attitude to such as myself there, to old emigrants. They understand that these were honest people with their own principles. Have you heard this song about lieutenant Golitsyn?'

'Do you speak Russian?' I asked the waiter. 'Nyet', he replied with a guilty smile, and he in turn asked if we would like an aperitif. Olga hesitated for some time between a 'Pushkin' and a 'Rasputin', before finally settling on a 'Pavlova'. I ordered an 'Uncle Vanya'. 'Very good choice', said the waiter approvingly. By the way that she studied the menu and discussed with the waiter the niceties of the sauces, it was evident that she did not relate light-heartedly to the forthcoming procedure. One could image the beautiful princess and the elegant Cuban in the restaurant of some liner, crossing the Atlantic, with starched table-cloths, crystal and silver... It was interesting for me to observe her, remembering the old rule, that the eyes are better witnesses than the ears. I sensed that it was pleasant for her here, in the semi-darkness of the restaurant, 'to be out' in familiar surroundings with a young man, or a relatively young man, but in any case young compared with her.

'Something for dessert?' asked the waiter, bringing up the trolley. 'Today we have a wonderful blackcurrant cake.' 'Shall we try it?' I suggested. 'Well, if you insist. You know, Capablanca adored sweet things. I remember him standing in front of the window of a confectioner's, not far from here, looking for a long time at a particular cake, and saying: 'You know, Kikiriki, I think you would like to try a piece of cake.'

'No, he did not smoke, but I secretly used to smoke a little. No, not Western cigarettes, but Russian. No, no, thank you, dushka, I haven't smoked for a long time. Why are you smiling? Come on, tell me what you're thinking about.' I hesitated for a while, but having decided that all this was before her time, and also nearly sixty years earlier, I related one of the stories, well known in Russia about Capablanca. He was then the Champion of the World, but the king, as is known, is played not by the king, but by his retinue. In Russia, apart from a retinue, Capablanca had devoted subjects and enthusiastic female admirers. During the First International Tournament in Moscow in 1925 a pretty cigarette sales-girl bowed to him and he invited her to have dinner with him in his hotel room. 'There is no way I can do that', answered the girl, 'it is nearly the end of the day, and I have hardly sold anything.' 'In that case I will buy everything that you have!' 'What do you mean, everything?' 'The whole tray.' The following morning the non-smoking Capablanca phoned the hotel porter. 'Take this stuff out of my room.' For a long time after that, the porter sold at a high price the cigarettes of Mr Capablanca..'

'Ah, how nice', Olga smiled. 'I know that when he was a student in New York, he had numerous romances, although, as I understand it, nothing serious, but he did not like to talk much about himself. Capa was handsome: aristocratic fingers, which he would cross when thinking, as would happen during a simultaneous, grey-green eyes, a wonderful smile. Women openly pursued him...'

'You know', she said, 'if you are not in a hurry to be anywhere, let's go home on foot, it is not very far.' I gave her my arm and the waiter followed us to the door and wished us a pleasant evening. On the street it was already dark, but the evening was still warm. We walked slowly along 57th Street as far as 5th Avenue. 'Let's cross here. Capa and I always used to cross here and walk on the other side.' At the corner of 59th Street and 5th Avenue she stopped by a Russian antique shop 'A la vieille Russie' and, bending down, began examining a medallion with an image of the last Russian Tsar. Her illuminated face, together with the silver birch tree on a picture standing inside the window, blended wonderfully with this fragment of old Russia in the very centre of New York. I remembered that some branch of the Tsar's family had lived in America: 'Did you know any of the Romanovs?' 'Yes, but I did not like them much, and I would rather not talk about that.'

We went on further and, turning into 68th Street, slowly walked as far as Park Avenue. We had to cross to the other side. 'You know', said Olga,

‘at one time, as a little girl with two silver roubles, I dashed off to America to fight for the rights of the Indians. I was seized at the railway station and, now, here I am. Right, let’s cross’, she said, as the sign turned to ‘Walk’. The porter noticed us from afar and came out from the door-way: ‘Good evening Mrs Clark, good evening Sir. What wonderful weather we’ve had today...’

We met several more times during my subsequent trips – at that time I regularly visited New York. These meetings would begin at her home, where we would drink a bottle or two, which she liked very much. I may be mistaken, but she seemed to enjoy being with me, and to enjoy both these visits and the trips to the Russian Tea Room. Not because it was me – she already knew more about me than the fact that I had no connection with Znosko-Borovsky, although, to be honest, not much more. She had simply become accustomed to constant attention, and to this concept of ‘going out’, and to male company, in which she had been all her life. And, of course, she enjoyed returning, by the hazy reminiscences of her youth – via ocean liners – to springtime in Paris, to wonderful London, to seagulls over the water in Amsterdam, and to that serene atmosphere of Europe in the pre-war years.

Olga belonged to a whole galaxy of Russian women, who in the 20s and 30s became the wives or lady friends of writers and artists from the West, its creative elite. Normally they were aristocratic women, but there were also those who were only out for adventure. With a knowledge of languages, they were full of energy and possessed a high degree of emotional spirit. Among those who enriched their creative potential from such women at various periods of their lives were Pablo Picasso, Paul Eluard, Romain Rolland, Salvador Dali, Herbert Wells, Louis Aragon, Fernand Léger and Henri Matisse. The collapse of old Russia, which always stood apart and at a distance from Europe, did nothing to reduce its mysterious, attractive force. More likely it was the opposite. Through the rumours of blood, executions and trials rose the names of Eisenstein, Pasternak and Meyerhold, Lisitsky and Malevich, and for Western intellectuals it was not easy to draw a line between the one and the other. But Olga was not only Russian. She belonged to that category of long-lived women, who are encountered at various times and social structures. World wars, revolutions, changes of country and of languages, it all takes its course, but life, life continues in any case. As a rule, men play an important role in their lives, often they outlive their children, if they have any, and they die not from

illness, which is simply not permitted by the organism, but of old age, when everything ceases to function. To live as these women lived by no means signified a lack of emotions, but they were always subordinate to that main course, which must continue come what may, life itself. And, if it is true that the majority of people die simply from the fact that they do not dare to live longer, this does not apply to them. They dared. They lived. The simple line of Maecenas 'Dum vita superest, bene est' (while life lasts, all is well) is engraved on the coat of arms of women of this order.

Several times in our conversations the name of Solzhenitsyn, who was then living in America, cropped up. He wrote about innocent people who were condemned to long imprisonment. It was clear that the thoughts of these desperate prisoners – if you cannot really live now, but only later, then why live at all – were completely foreign to her. Live! Whatever the cost. Follow this path to the end.

Olga Knipper-Chekhova, who performed in the plays of her famous husband back at the end of the last century and died a people's artist of the USSR and Stalin prize-winner at the age of 91. Marlene Dietrich, who died in Paris at the same age. Lilia Brik, the muse of Mayakovsky, and the other Chekhova, also Olga, whom Olga Clark recalled, a well known film actress of the Third Reich, who starred at receptions along with Hitler and Göring and had secret connections with the Soviets. Leni Riefenstahl, at the close of her tenth decade preparing to meet a new era. The mysterious Gala Dyakonova, who also reached an advanced age, without whom Salvador Dali would hardly have become the person he became. Alma Mahler with her full and stormy life, who survived much and outlived many.

However, Olga created her own constellation. Her first husband was an officer in the White Army, a cavalryman and later a pilot, which at the end of the 20s sounded much more exotic than in our times. According to Olga, he was a descendent of Genghis Khan and himself a Prince, and he left her his title. The second was the chess king, the third a possessor of an Olympic gold medal, effectively also a world champion. And the fourth was a war hero, an admiral, an American hero. But this did not suffice for Olga. She wrote her own wide-ranging biography, beginning with her great-grandfather Evdokimov, the famous conqueror of the Caucasus, about whom she used to speak on every convenient occasion. To check this fact was just as difficult as the distant kinship of her first husband with Genghis Khan, and to say that the name of the famous commander was not Evdokimov at all, but Ermolov, I somehow did not dare.

A Russian Princess, this blended well in any combination. With an Olympic Champion, with an admiral, but it produced the greatest effect in combination with the chess king. The chess king and the Russian Princess, this sounded wonderful at diplomatic receptions and those which Olga called 'parties'. At such receptions it was possible to meet anyone: genuine former kings, professional and honorary diplomats, as was Capablanca himself, owners of enormous estates, acquired by means unknown, a Maharaja, or an alleged daughter of the Tsar, supposedly saved by a miracle from being shot. Olga's entire life resembled one long party with champagne and flowers. To her, and indeed to him, it was all the same what political views were held by Krylenko, Von Ribbentrop or a Maharaja.

In 1988 Olga appeared in an enormously low-cut dress at a ceremony dedicated to the 100th anniversary of Capablanca's birth in the Manhattan Chess Club. She herself was already ninety. She did not change her habits and arrived half an hour late, but the only one who might have reproached her for that was looking down from the stage on photographs of half a century ago. Sometimes she would enter into discussions about chess, about the thoughts of the young Capablanca during his first visit to Europe, or about the San Sebastian tournament, causing me involuntarily to recall Gogol's lines from a letter to his loving mother: 'Never make judgements, my dear and clever mother, about literature.' Olga herself did not play chess. Well, what of it. In the end Racine's wife never read the works of her husband, as was the case with the wife of Heine, who asserted: 'People say that Heinrich is a clever man, and that he has written many wonderful books. I have to take them at their word, although I myself have not noted anything.'

My question, admittedly an absurd one, as to whether Capablanca and Tartakower played with a clock, was simply not understood by her, although a short time later she talked about the evaluation of a difficult adjourned position between Capablanca and Bogoljubow from the Nottingham Tournament, reminding me of the reply, full of elegant virtue, by the wife of another World Champion, Vasily Smyslov: 'I do not play chess, but I can judge a position.' I asked her about much else, remembering that he who asks a lot receives many answers. But almost all her replies were similar, like polished stones on the sea-shore, to those that had already been heard. The only difference was that in the restaurant she would order a 'Rasputin', and I a 'Pushkin'. It was obvious that I was not the first who had asked her about Capablanca. She had created his image and somewhere else I would later encounter something that she had said to me, al-

most word for word. However, even what is known is known only to a few, and Olga knew what was expected of her. What is more, it was not hard to create the image of him, since in many ways that is how he was. They were together for eight years, but did she understand him well? Eight years? 'For forty-eight years I lived with Lev Nikolaevich, and I still did not know what sort of a person he was', wrote Tolstoy's widow after the death of her husband.

Although Olga talked about events of more than fifty years earlier, I realised that, even out of the retouched past, the unbiased listener could always coax out the traits, important and minor, of probably the most legendary Champion in the history of the game. Of course, I wanted to know which chess books he had at home, how he analysed, how he prepared for a game, or if he prepared at all. Olga would reply that he did not like chess, which seems to me improbable, that he did not prepare for games at all, and that, according to himself, if chess had not captivated him so in his youth, he would probably have taken to studying medicine. Being familiar with what he did at the chess board, I once again gently led her away from stories about chess games, or 'igry' as she called them, since for her the Russian word 'partiya' signified something else: evening dresses, dances and champagne. I endeavoured to direct her along the lines of a Chekhov prayer: 'God, don't let me talk about what I do not know', but when Olga would again begin talking about an endless carnival in Cuba or the lively, carefree life in New York in the early 30s, in the depths of my soul arose the disturbing thought: it depends for whom – undoubtedly the consequence of lectures on dialectical materialism in my distant youth. But I cannot say that it was boring for me with her. She livened up after her favourite champagne and could talk enthusiastically about the colour of the suit that Mrs Euwe was wearing, what the conversation with Mrs Flohr was about in Nottingham, when she met her that morning at the hairdresser's on the day of the closing ceremony, or what particular compliments were addressed to her by the German Minister of Foreign Affairs in Paris at the Cuban Consulate. Here one could be sure that her memory was not betraying her. At these moments she was a young and very feminine person. A smile would play on her face and one could imagine how in the summer of 1920 in Constantinople the former White Guard officer was carried away, as was fourteen years later the no longer young and wordly-wise chess king. But the reality of life should not be forgotten, and a minute later she was asking me what would be the value of the gold medal won by Capablanca at the Olympiad in Buenos Aires in 1939. Olga liked to engross

herself in memories, but without having her head in the clouds. She had her feet firmly on the ground, an essential condition for such a long existence on it. And although these reminiscences were not all that deep, she talked about everything with such pleasure, that the thought crept in: Perhaps this is how one should live? Even so, these superficial reminiscences and repetitions were not the reason why I did not phone her on my next visit to New York. It was rather something else. Olga talked about Capablanca as something perfect, and perfection has only one defect: it can become tedious. If I had been asked what it was, strictly speaking, that I had against him, I would have answered, like the famous Athenian beggar: I have nothing against him, it is simply that I am tired of constantly hearing that Capablanca was the best bridge player, that Capablanca was the best billiards player, and so on.

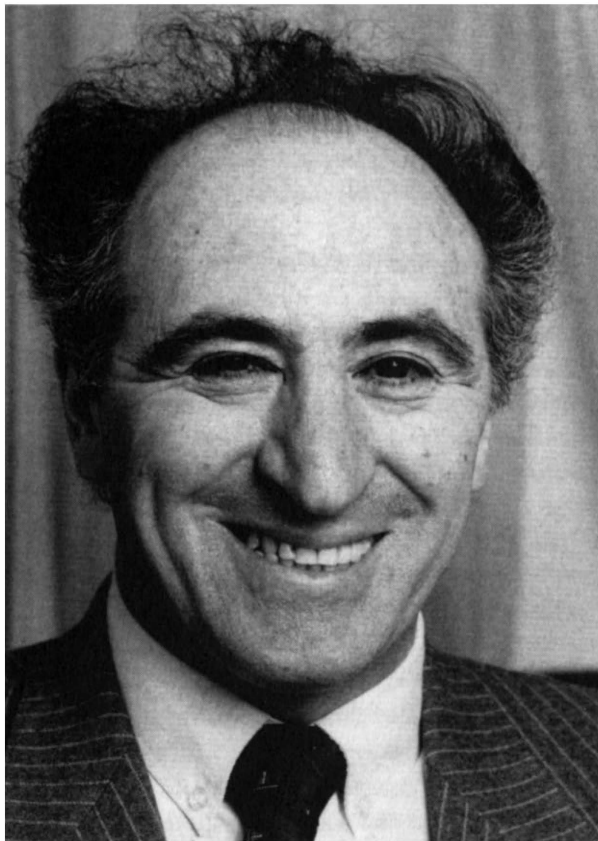
The last time I heard her voice was when I phoned her from the airport before flying back to Europe, and explained what an intensive visit I had had, which was willfully taking liberties with the truth, and that next year...

Next year never happened. When I arrived in New York in September 1995 for Kasparov's match with Anand, I asked about her. 'Don't you know', they told me, 'Olga died a year and half ago.' I felt a pang, as always happens in such cases, although I had already experienced many such losses, and some that were closer. I said to myself that it was unavoidable, such news would arrive at some point. Olga died on 24 April 1994 in New York at the age of 95.

I learned that she had bequeathed Capablanca's entire archives to the Manhattan Chess Club, his club. It was a wonderful sunny autumn and the city which never sleeps especially did not sleep on 46th West Street between 8th and 9th Avenues, where the American Chess Association, and now also the Manhattan Chess Club, were accommodated. There Capablanca's archives were kept. I arrived just before eleven, from the street there carried an endless noise, but I became engrossed in a totally different world, the world of Marshall, Lederer, Kupchik, Euwe and, of course, Alekhine. But all of them, like many others, were only a part, some more, some less, of his world, El Morphy cubano, as the Cuban papers often called him. In thick folders, the Capablanca Clippings, beginning at 1901, were carefully sorted letters to him, the score sheets of his games with Alekhine, tax declarations, newspaper cuttings, often discoloured with age, contracts, bills, and accounts from the publishers of his books.

Telegrams, telegrams, including one from his proud parents, congratulating him on his first big success: the victory in his match with Marshall in 1909. Photographs, jottings, sometimes very personal. In Spanish, English, more rarely in French, and even more rarely in German. Everything was of interest to me. Not being a chess historian, I was unable, as often also in life, to distinguish the important from the secondary. There was a report on the AVRO- tournament with a photograph taken before the start of the 9th round in Arnhem on November 19th 1938, the day of his fiftieth birthday. Elegant, as ever, he stands before the microphone, and at his side, Olga, with a bunch of flowers. Within a few hours he would lose a game to the one whose existence had poisoned his life over the past decade. There was also her pass to the tournament – for the first time as his official wife. They were married on 20 October, and a few days later set sail for Europe. And there was a little Russian item of hers: a check for an annual subscription to the newspaper *New Russian Word*, written in January 1942, two months before his death and with her signature at that time: Olga Chagodaeva-Capablanca.

And there were letters and telegrams of condolence, although not all that many. One from Marshall's widow, another in Russian, but effectively nothing from chess players, but then in Europe the war had been at its height. These letters, contracts, and documents were filled with ambition and monetary accounts, intimate requests and cold fury, with the passions of people who were no longer, but who lived, lived... When I raised my head, beyond the window the noise of New York could still be heard. The hand of the clock was inexorably approaching three, and it was high time to return to the real world, to another match for the World Championship, to the same and yet a very different type of chess.



left: Polugaevsky in  
the '80s.

below: Kortchnoi,  
Karpov, Petrosian and  
Polugaevsky at the  
Soviet Championship  
in Moscow 1973.

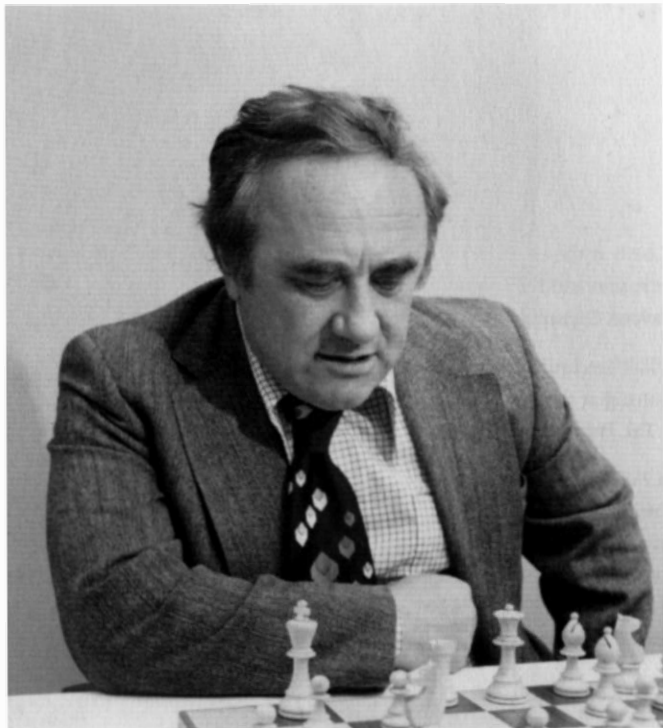


right: Fidel Castro at the chess board assisted by Petrosian and Polugaevsky, during the Havana Olympiad 1966.

middle: the FIDE headquarters in Amsterdam. sitting at the table are Polugaevsky, Tal, Petrosian and Spassky.

bottom: Sofia Polgar, Polugaevsky, Judit Polgar and Sosonko in Aruba 1991 at the closing ceremony of the matches Judit vs Polugaevsky and Sofia vs Sosonko.





above: Geller in Wijk aan Zee 1969.

below: Efim Geller, his wife Oksana and their son Sasha in 1990, at the family's dacha in Peredelkino.





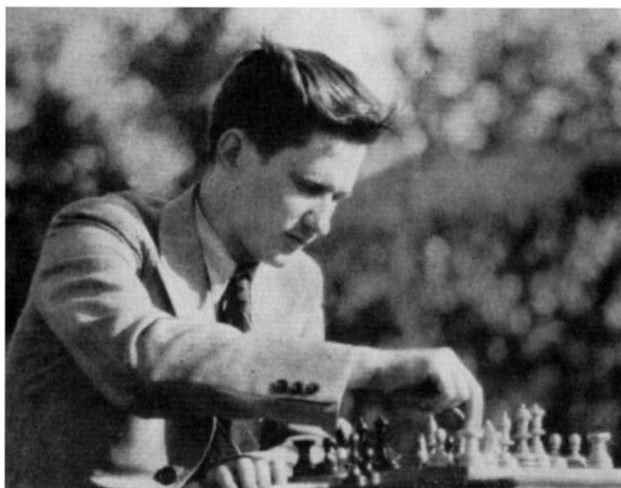
top: Capablanca and Olga in 1938.

above: Capablanca in a simul around 1910

left: José Raúl Capablanca y Graupera.

below: 6 May 1984. The author's first meeting with Olga at the Manhattan Chess Club.





top: Paul Keres in 1947 during an open air demonstration game against Vasily Smyslov in Tallinn's Kadrioru Stadium.

right: In the summer of 1944 Paul Keres (far right) and his family are waiting in vain for a boat to escape to Sweden.



bottom left: Wartime chess. Paul Keres playing Alexander Alekhine at a tournament in Prague in 1943.

bottom right: April 2007. Boris Spassky, Viktor Kortchnoi and Genna Sosonko next to the Keres memorial in Pärnu.



# A Great Teacher Inspires

Vladimir Zak

I was 12 years old when I first went to the Leningrad Pioneers' Palace. There were many who wanted to learn chess, and in order to select the best, the trainers used to give simultaneous displays. It was then that for the first time I saw Vladimir Grigoryevich Zak.

Our game did not last long: after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 I replied 2...Nc6. Zak asked how old I was, and whether I knew how Black should play in this position. Instead of replying, I made a gesture suggesting that he should continue the game. Naturally I did not pass the selection test, and it was only from the following year that I began studying chess at the Pioneers' Palace. From that period there remains in my memory a stern man with striking, Assyrian facial features, and with staring, unblinking dark eyes, and a constant flexing of his jaw muscles, especially during analysis when he was considering a position.

The Chess Club of the Pioneers' Palace was in the splendid, former walnut study of Tsar Alexander III in the Anichkov Palace, with an enormous chandelier hanging from the ceiling. It was not by accident that groups of foreign tourists were always coming in here. Somewhat contrasting with the Tsarist atmosphere was a large painting: Lenin playing chess on the island of Capri, with Gorky watching, on a sunny April day in 1908.

Usually one of the trainers – often it was Zak himself – would give explanations to the foreigners and tell them how many children were in the groups, how often they came, and so on. Zak did not particularly like doing this: it diverted him from the lessons, and besides, the questions were always the same. When guests appeared the children would stand up, and without taking their eyes off the board would begin chatting. The smallest would neatly arrange the pieces they had captured from the enemy next to the board. For children capturing a queen or a rook is much more appealing than such a non-material concept as checkmate. When the foreigners had left, Vladimir Grigoryevich or the other trainers would reprimand the most noisy, and the lessons would resume their course until the next visit.

The heavy door of the club opened precisely at four, and all would head for the notice-boards on which hung the tournament tables, find out whom they had to play, set out the pieces, and those playing with clocks would ask Vladimir Grigoryevich or the other trainers: 'Would you set the hands for me, please' – in order to set the correct time, an adjuster was

needed, and it was always missing on the chess clocks. The most skilful could move the clock hands using coins, but this was not always possible. Vladimir Grigoryevich had his own patent, weighted adjuster, which he rarely let out of his sight, and if this did happen, he would reprimand anyone who did not return the instrument to him straight away. The time control was an hour and three quarters for 36 moves, after which the game was adjourned. On an envelope the positions of the pieces on the board were recorded, and the clock times noted. A shield formed by the fingers helped to maintain the secrecy of the sealed move, defending it against the curious glances of the opponent as it was being recorded. After the move had been recorded, the envelope was put in a special folder, awaiting the adjournment session. Sometimes, replying to the question by my mother 'How did your game go?' I would resort to the saving formula 'adjourned', but from my despondent appearance she no doubt guessed the bitter truth.

It was permitted to play blitz only once a week, on Sundays. Occasionally permission was received also on a week-day, with the obligatory promise not to make any noise, a promise which, of course, was constantly broken. The guilty person would be chided, and in the event of a recurrence the clocks could be altogether taken away. If a game was finished, one could ask any trainer who at that moment was free, to look through it; usually this request came from the winner. Once I asked Zak to analyse a game that I had just won. When we arrived at the critical position, I said: 'I stood worse here, of course, but my opponent was very nervous; then I also got myself into time trouble, he began playing for time and he went wrong.' Vladimir Grigoryevich grew visibly darker. 'Did I teach you to play like that? Disgraceful! What sort of a trick is that?' I do not remember all the words he said to me. The children were afraid of Vladimir Grigoryevich, perhaps more than of the other trainers. 'What have you got there?' Vladimir Grigoryevich would ask severely. 'A sheet of paper? And do you know what happens to sheets? Where is your theory notebook? Make sure that this is the last time, and that from now on everything is transferred to your notebook.' His rebuke came back to me quite recently when, after rummaging through everything, I was unable to find an important piece of analysis on the Grünfeld Defence, which had been written on a loose sheet.

But I can also picture him, with a cheerful twinkle in his eye, as he reprimanded a boy: 'Which of us were you speaking to when you said Vladimir Grigoryevich?' Alongside Zak stood the master player Kirillov, who

was also called Vladimir Grigoryevich, and the boy did not know whether he was joking or being serious.

As I grew older, I began travelling to competitions in other towns. In Riga at the All-Union Junior Championship in 1959 I spent a long evening with him analysing an adjourned position. In a double-edged rook ending where I was a pawn up, we came to the conclusion that I should definitely begin with h4, preventing the opponent's counterplay. On arriving for the resumption, I saw that my pawn was already standing on this square. Vladimir Grigoryevich looked at the position and, without even deigning to look at me, slowly walked away. I did not win the game even with my pawn at h4, and I was afraid to look him in the eye, but he, seeing my suffering, never afterwards reminded me of this episode. There was also a visit to Tbilisi in January 1960 for a match between junior teams from Georgia, Leningrad and Moscow. At that time this was quite a journey: three whole days in the train with a change in Moscow. On the free day Vladimir Grigoryevich took our entire team to visit Vakhtang Karseladze, the famous trainer who laid the basis of women's chess in Georgia. We drank tea and observed Zak and Karseladze with surprise. They called each other Volodya and Vakhtang, and recalled various tournaments and games, and we saw that these tournaments and these games were for them the most important things in life. I was 16 years old, and already a heavy smoker, but of course I did not even think of smoking in the presence of Vladimir Grigoryevich.

Sometimes the club would be visited by pupils of his, who had become masters or grandmasters, the best known of them being Viktor Kortchnoi and Boris Spassky. Large photos of the two hung directly under the portraits of the very greatest, awaiting their turn to extend the top row, but the children recognised them and looked at them as if they were Gods.

Boris Spassky was nine when he first saw Zak. Spassky recalls: 'The summer of 1946 was a very bright period in my life. I had not yet joined the Pioneers' Palace, and in the summer I used to go to the Central Park. I remember the chess pavilion there with a knight on the pediment, a lake alongside, chess tables, and suddenly the appearance of a man of strikingly Eastern appearance. If he had been wearing a turban he would have been a genuine Indian fakir. It was like an apparition from a fairy-tale world. That was how I saw Zak for the first time. And he was also doing something magical – playing one against many. The impression made by Smyslov, giving a simultaneous display a year later, inevitably was less deep. That

year I began going to him at the Pioneers' Palace, but that was not all. He began studying with me directly, personally, at home, individually. He always did this, if he saw someone with talent. He lived for this, it would excite him. Of course he could also make mistakes, but he worked, and worked a great deal, to the detriment of himself, and his family. It was he who taught me the King's Gambit, and taught me not to be afraid of advancing my king in the opening. After all, children soak up everything like a sponge, and I soaked it up. Thus I became the king of the King's Gambit in the twentieth century, since essentially I alone played it.

'But it was not only chess that he studied with me. The first time in my life that I went to the opera was also with him. I recall that it was Carmen, and then we also went to see Lakmé. I have retained a love for opera to this day, and now I have a large collection of operas. In this too Vladimir Grigoryevich had a hand... At his insistence I also read Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, and I was greatly tormented and suffered for several days, when the prince again had to be transformed into a pauper. Also at his insistence I joined the skating club, since I was quite a good skater when I was young, but then chess began, and this passion, of course, outweighed everything else. At my first training session, with someone else's skates, I fell and lost consciousness, and lay there for a considerable time; when I came to, the trainer looked at me so sorrowfully, as if to say: off you go and study your chess.

'At that time he also did another enormous thing for me. Thanks to Zak and Levenfish, who in the late 40s worked on the Sports Committee, I began receiving a stipend. Materially this meant a great deal for my family, and we were able to breathe a little more freely. For this alone I am immeasurably grateful to him, and even now I help his family.

'Zak adopted much from Romanovsky, who was his idol. I myself saw Romanovsky when I was a boy and knew him a little. He made a great impression on Zak, because he was a typical idealist. He loved chess selflessly, he had a sense of sacrifice, everything for chess, a genuine chess fanatic. And he was a kind of semi-intellectual, in contrast, for example, to Levenfish or Bogatyrchuk. Spiritually Zak was also more of a semi-intellectual and in some ways a real Soviet.

'It seems to me that he was not a good pedagogue. In Riga in 1951 we both played in a quarter-final of the USSR Championship and were living, as usual, in the same hotel room. I economised on my food, and then, at the end, after saving up 14 chocolates, I gave them to him: 'These are for you, Vladimir Grigoryevich – for your little girls, your daughters.' But he

wouldn't take them. He said: 'No, they are yours, after all you like sweets.' I was very offended. Well, he could at least have taken a few, and given back the rest, but not all of them...

'There in Riga we went together to see the film *The Last Round*, where at the end a boxer knocks out his trainer. Vladimir Grigoryevich even left the auditorium and said touchily: 'One day you will knock me out like that.' He was very quick to take offence. I once gave a lecture at the Central Club in 1960, when I was already working with Bondarevsky. There was something in the lecture that he did not like, and afterwards he came up to me and said: 'You are a scoundrel!' And for him to say this was perhaps more difficult that it was for me to hear it. Vladimir Grigoryevich had a difficult character, perhaps for the reason that his life was difficult. I remember – this was already much later – being at his dacha, in Ushkovo, when we sat together for a whole evening with a bottle of cognac, and he told me all about his life, his difficult life. In general, as I grew older I began to value him more. When I was hopelessly losing my match to Karpov in 1974, and Bondarevsky already understood this perfectly well, Vladimir Grigoryevich phoned me and said: 'You know, Borya, I have a variation, let's look at it together.' It was very touching.'

Viktor Kortchnoi was 14 years old when he came under the supervision of Zak. The word supervision does not fully transmit the entire range of relationships, chess and human, between the trainer and his pupil.

As Kortchnoi expounded: 'I grew up without my father, who died at the front, and in many ways Zak replaced him. I used to go to his home, where I was well received by his family, and he moulded me as a person. He could, perhaps, be called a Leningrad intellectual, and I followed his manners; for example, even now it is hard for me to pass someone I know, and not to raise my hat. I got this from him; it may be only a minor trait, but even so.

'Was he also my chess teacher? Only in a certain sense and up to a certain level. He played some role in my choice of opening repertoire, the Grünfeld Defence and the Open Variation of the Ruy Lopez, but it was rather I who taught myself, although I do not consider myself to be so self-taught as Karpov or Ivanchuk. At a higher level he effectively could no longer give me anything. He should not in fact have aimed for that level, although I am not sure whether he himself realised this. He was ambitious for his pupils, and he was pleased when they were successful. Whom he liked more, me or Spassky, I don't know. Probably Spassky, since he came

to him when he was very young. And he was very upset when Spassky left him for Tolush, very upset. Later, incidentally, I regretted that I too did not go over to Tolush, for he significantly enriched Spassky as a player and taught him a great deal.

'I don't think that Zak was a difficult person. It was rather that he was firm in his principles, and I do not see anything bad in that. The fact that he sent me the book about Leningrad chess without any mention there of my name, I consider to be the start of his illness. Perhaps it was this very fact, that he excluded me from his list of people, from the list of Leningrad players, that became one of the causes of his senility. He wrote to me saying that such a book was better than none at all, but I replied to him, no, it was better no book, rather than lying. After this there was no further contact between us.'

It so happened that Vladimir Grigoryevich also played a decisive role in the walk of life that I chose. When, after finishing school, I was faced with the question of where to continue my studies, he said: 'What do you think about the Faculty of Geography at the University? Firstly, it is an easy course, and there will be plenty of time for chess, and besides, the Deputy Dean there is very fond of the game. And if you really don't like it, you can always transfer to some other Faculty.' My fate was decided, and although I later wondered whether or not to go in some other direction, the five years flew past somehow imperceptibly, and I graduated from the Faculty of Geography after specialising in the Economic Geography of the capitalist countries. In the early 70s, when I had already moved to the West, I read in a chess encyclopaedia, published in England, that Sosonko was making practical use of the theoretical knowledge he had acquired at University.

After starting University and no longer having any formal contact with the Pioneers' Palace, sauntering along the Nevsky Prospect I would sometimes call in at the chess club. But I only really got to know Vladimir Grigoryevich when I myself began working there as a trainer. Then we saw each other almost every day over quite a lengthy period, right up to the time when I left the country.

Vladimir Grigoryevich Zak was born on 11th February 1913 into a Jewish family in the town of Berdichev in the Ukraine. In the 20s the family moved to Leningrad. Vulf became Vladimir, and his Jewishness somehow melted, and disappeared into the distance, until in the late 40s he was re-

mind of it by the state itself. But, by culture and education he was, of course, a Russian.

Zak spent the entire war at the front, and there he joined the Party, which at the time was quite natural. Chess was always the main thing in his life. Before the war he studied with Romanovsky. At the house of the maestro a group of young Leningrad players gathered, including Zak. Under the guidance of Romanovsky they analysed games, developed openings, and played theme tournaments. Often he would talk about the leading players from the past. Zak tried to carry over the aroma of these lessons to the children in the Pioneers' Palace. 'Who, do you think, was the strongest player of all at the end of the last century?' he would ask, copying Romanovsky. The children had absolutely no idea what to answer, and were totally at a loss: 'Steinitz? Chigorin?' 'That is what we too replied', said Vladimir Grigoryevich. After all the conceivable names had been given, Romanovsky, raising his index finger, would say: 'Mason, you should look at Mason's games. Mason played stronger than anyone...' Only on becoming more grown up, were the children to learn the conclusion of this sentence, which was not said to them for pedagogical reasons. It was: '...if he was sober, of course, and this did not happen often...'

It is noteworthy that Zak himself did not in fact become a master. Twice after the War he played matches for the master title, which was the practice at that time. One of them he lost to Vasiliev, a war invalid. He was a strong master and analyst. Vladimir Grigoryevich used to tell me about his end-game analyses – rook and knight against rook, where Vasiliev demonstrated that the defending side's task was very difficult. It always seemed to me that it should be possible to draw anyway you like, but every time I see this rare ending, I think of Zak and Vasiliev's secret analyses. Vladimir Grigoryevich lost the other match to Yury Averbakh, who soon after this became a grandmaster.

The fact that he did not become a master left him with a wound, which did not heal, even when in 1958 he was awarded the title 'Honoured Trainer of the USSR'. I can picture him at the Closing Ceremony of the USSR Junior Championships, when the tournament controller, presenting the trainer of the Leningrad team, stumbled: 'master of sport... master of sport... candidate master of sport... Vladimir Zak.' Zak's face and his entire appearance resembled an ancient Inca statue: his unblinking stare was fixed on the speaker, and only his jaw muscles twitched more than usual.

One day Zak told me about a game of his with Suetin. In a winning position, Suetin, then a young candidate master, blundered away the ex-

change and immediately noticed it. Tears welled up in his eyes, and Zak allowed him to take the move back. Some ten moves later Suetin won the game by a direct attack.

Obviously, such clemency should be anathema to a tournament player. Besides, combining play with training work was becoming increasingly difficult, and Zak soon completely gave up playing. But, to be honest, he was not a particularly strong player. As Mark Taimanov explained: 'Zak was a player of rather narrow ideas, and to some extent a dogmatist. He worked on theory and contributed to certain variations, but this was done very dogmatically.'

Indeed, his chess conceptions had a complete, settled, and in some way Talmudic character. His opening tastes too were constant. Recalling the time of my apprenticeship, and the period from the late 60s to early 70s when I saw him close to as a trainer, I can say that he had several systems and openings that he passionately advocated: the Grünfeld Defence, the Open Variation and the Jaenisch Variation (3...f5) in the Ruy Lopez, the system with g3 in the Sicilian, the Schara-Hennig Gambit and, of course, the King's Gambit. In principle he liked positions where the material balance was disturbed, or which were unusual in a positional sense. In such positions you could not get away with assessments such as 'comes into consideration', or half-measures. Often when analysing with others he would cleave the air with a sharp, thrusting movement of his hand, emphasising that the move or variation suggested was unsound. His speech, and also that of the other trainers, was interspersed with strange expressions and citations, and amazing associations, which were often employed during analysis. 'Well now', Vladimir Grigoryevich would say, making a move, 'well now, as Pyotr Ivanovich and I used to say' (or Pyotr Arsenyevich, depending on his mood). Frequently he would employ card-play terminology, such as: 'Let's take a trick' when creating some threat, or: 'First we take our own tricks' when regaining material.

Sometimes two trainers would take part in the analysis of a game just played. The post-mortem, as often happens, would be transformed into a game, and the search for the truth would be replaced by attempts to prove one's case. The children would watch the encounter of the two trainers, sometimes themselves suggesting moves, and time, suffused by the wonderful game, would fly by unnoticed.

When Vladimir Grigoryevich was talking, one sensed that for him chess was everything, or more correctly, this entire world, where the Junior Semi-Final of the City sounded like the 'Song of Solomon', where analys-

ing the subtleties of a rook ending was the most important thing imaginable, and where the question of who should play for the City's Junior Team and on what board grew to a problem of global dimensions. This devotion to chess was sensed very well by the children, who could not help being infected.

For all that, Vladimir Grigoryevich was not of gentle disposition. He was a person who demanded respect, and he was very easily offended, touchy and obstinate. I do not think that it would be correct to attribute all this to those difficult times and his difficult life. Life was hard for everyone then, as is any life in general and at all times. Often he could not or did not want to understand the other person's position, and the concept of compromise was foreign to him. In such cases he would completely sever relations, ceasing even to say hello.

During my training work in the Palace he was not on speaking terms with the master player Byvshev. It would happen several times a day that first one, and then the other, would say to me: 'Genna, do you think you could say to Vasily Mikhailovich', or 'Genna, would you ask, please, Vladimir Grigoryevich'. He called me Genna, of course, and used the familiar form of address, while I called him Vladimir Grigoryevich, although in front of the children he would address me by first name and patronymic, before perhaps becoming carried away during a joint analysis, when he would again revert to Genna. We were now colleagues, and I too would travel with the children to competitions. Now I too would give explanations to groups of foreign tourists, who had come to the Palace chess club, knowing in the depths of my soul (a feeling I have retained to this day) that no foreigner understands or can understand Russia. My explanations and replies to questions were repeated each time. Only on one occasion did I not know what to say, when an elderly farmer from Iowa with blue, child-like eyes, stopped by the picture of Lenin playing chess, and asked unexpectedly: 'Who won?'

I often stood, leaning on the wide window-sill, looking at the line of the Nevsky Prospect stretching into the distance, while from behind me carried the customary sounds: children's voices, the noise of clocks being pressed, and the clatter of pieces being knocked over. Or I would go out to have a smoke; the adjoining door led to the reception room, where sat the charming Irochka, the secretary of the Palace Director. Finally the time would approach eight, the club would gradually empty, and, if the other trainers had already left, Vladimir Grigoryevich would say to me: 'Well, Genna, isn't it time for us to go?' We would switch off the splendid chan-

delier, twice turn the enormous key, and proceed to the wonderful marble staircase of the former Tsar's Palace, which had seen much in its time. Descending the staircase we would pass by a large painting. Pioneers in red scarves looking rapturously at Andrey Alexandrovich Zhdanov<sup>1</sup> – with his puffy face, small moustache, and service jacket with large pockets. The Pioneers' Palace was named after Zhdanov, as was the University from which I had graduated, and it would have been logical if I had also lived in the Zhdanov District, but I didn't – I lived in the Dzerzhinsky<sup>2</sup> District. Often we were met by parents or babushkas, who enquired how their children had done, or simply asked whether their child had been naughty. The parents of the youngest waited for them for several hours downstairs in front of the cloak-room. Often they were a long way from home, and there was no point in returning, in order to set out again half an hour later, for time then was not worth anything.

Vladimir Grigoryevich always gave a few kopecks to the old lady cloak-room attendants, and invariably addressed them by their first name and patronymic, Maria Gavrilovna or Varvara Timofeevna. In winter he always wore the same black coat with its worn collar. In his hand he held a brown briefcase, which had also seen better days. It was not unusual for him to borrow ten roubles until the next pay-day – a common phenomenon then. We would go out onto the Fontanka River and walk to the Anichkov Bridge, chatting about this and that. One spring evening, as we stepped onto the bridge and continued our conversation about someone, Vladimir Grigoryevich said: 'You know, Genna, I never swear, but about that man I can only say that he... No, did you ever hear me say even one abusive word?' I shook my head. 'Well, please excuse me, but that man...' Descending from the bridge we drew level with the wonderful beauty of the Beloselsky-Belozersky Palace, where the Kuibyshev Regional Communist Party Committee was then accommodated. Vladimir Grigoryevich once more looked around, to make sure that he could not be heard by any chance passer-by, and quietly said: 'That man is a shit.'

At the corner of the Nevsky and Vladimirsky our ways parted: he would catch a tram home, while I would cross to the other side of the Nevsky, not yet knowing whether to turn to the right in the direction of home, or to

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1 A.A. Zhdanov (1896-1948) Communist leader and Soviet official, the chief of the Leningrad Party Committee.

2 F.E. Dzerzhinsky (1877-1926) Chief of Cheka, predecessor of the KGB.

the left towards the Sadovaya and the Chigorin Club. The evening was only just beginning, and it was uncertain how and when it would end.

Vladimir Grigoryevich had numerous acquaintances in the scientific world. Over a long period of time he ran a chess circle in the House of Scientists. He himself had studied at the Institute of Cinema Engineers, but had never worked in his speciality, and, it seems to me, he felt a great sense of respect for all these professors and scientists, who gathered once a week in a detached house on the Neva and under his direction analysed games or played in tournaments. For them chess was not only their favourite game, to which they had devoted their childhood or teenage years, but also a way of escaping into another world, one without meetings, reports on current affairs, anniversaries and collective letters of protest or support, with which all life was permeated in those times.

In January of 1972, my last year in Russia, we were together in Chernigov at the All-Union Junior Championships. The topics of conversation over supper were the usual ones: X simply cannot avoid getting into time trouble, Y is disappointing, but Z, by contrast, has greatly improved. Occasionally, when the conversation touched on life itself, Vladimir Grigoryevich would sigh: 'If Lenin were still alive, everything would be different' – a viewpoint which was fairly widespread then among people of his generation. I heard him and yet I did not. My own life was already occupied with something else: a few months later I submitted my application to leave the Soviet Union.

We met a few days before a public meeting, where everyone was to condemn my act, as casting a shadow on the entire Pioneers' Palace. We walked together for a long time not far from his home. I avoided talking indoors, for reasons that will be understandable to anyone who lived at that time in the Soviet Union. Vladimir Grigoryevich said right-away that he would not be going to the meeting, just as, incidentally, the other trainers, my chess colleagues, did not go. 'Can you imagine what fate awaits you, if they do not allow you to leave?' he asked. He was then nearly sixty, and he knew very well how such escapades involving the state could end. One could never foresee how long the process of waiting for a visa would last, and how, in general, it would all turn out. The later example of Gulko, who was refused for seven years, is evidence of this. As we parted, Zak said: 'Whatever happens, Genna, I wish you happiness', and he did not so much embrace me, as somehow bow to me. Banal words, of course, but significant ones coming from him, and it is probably for this reason that they have stayed with me. That was the last time I saw him.

We had no contact until the late 80s, although I knew that he was continuing to work in the Palace; some things reached me even in distant Holland. One of his pupils became a grandmaster and European Junior Champion – this was Alexander Kochiev, whom I had known as a thin little boy with red hair, who already then was distinguished by his philosophical attitude to life and a remarkable ability to play blitz.

Of approximately the same age was another of his pupils, whom I also remember well: a likeable, chubby boy with a pioneer's scarf. His contemporaries called him Yermola and he could not yet know that within a quarter of a century he would be playing on top board for the United States and be nicknamed the Yerminator. After my departure those who studied with Zak included both Valery Salov and the very small Gata Kamsky. But in the end he had to leave the Palace, where he had worked for more than forty years. By that time he was also on bad terms with other colleagues, some of whom were his former pupils. They already had their own pupils, and their own ambitions and ideas about the training process. Indeed, Vladimir Grigoryevich was a man of 'strong opinions', and if he said 'this is what I think' it sounded as though it was the only correct viewpoint. By that time he was 73, an age which is more disposed to reflecting on the frailty of all things earthly, than demonstrating the subtleties of the Schara-Hennig Gambit. But he simply could not give up what he had devoted all his life to. Free time would become dangerous for him, and he would hardly acquire peace in idleness. Zak began working as a trainer at the chess school of the University, directed by Alexander Kentler. Here, too, Vladimir Grigoryevich liked to analyse positions with disrupted material balance, and here, too, he demonstrated his openings, even if sometimes he repeated himself. At first he worked three days a week, then two, then only one... It need hardly be said that he was never late for work by even a minute. Not always did everything work out on the board, but he left his mark, even if only a slight one, on the lives of many.

During his final years he wrote several books, which are instructive for any trainer. But there are also paragraphs that hint at an old wound. Zak himself formulated it as follows: 'Can trainers continue successfully working with their pupils, when their practical strength begins to be inferior to the mastery of the pupils?' This problem extends beyond the bounds of chess, and indeed of sport in general. Should a trainer or teacher always be superior to his pupil, or can such superiority even create a barrier, since people, to whom the greatest achievements seem simple and natural, cannot understand why an idea, manoeuvre or movement, which is obvious

for them, can become a source of difficulty for others. There is also another aspect to this problem: the limits and degrees of a pupil's gratitude to his teacher. In music, for example, the profession of the children's teacher has long-standing traditions. In chess the very concept of a children's trainer first appeared in the Soviet Union somewhere in the 30s and became widespread there only after the War. Perhaps therefore there was no clear-cut watershed between the children's trainer, the trainer, the second or simply the sparring-partner. Indeed, Zak reacted very badly when the 14-year-old Spassky left him for Tolush, a trainer who showed him chess from another side and caused his play to flourish. It has to be borne in mind that all this took place against the background of human and material relations in an artificial, oppressive, totalitarian system, shut off from the rest of the world. Making sacrifices, idealism, and simply working for nothing, was considered normal. Botvinnik, who often mentioned Van Gogh in conversations, used to ask me: 'Why, do you think, Van Gogh did not do any large paintings?' And he himself would reply: 'Because he did not have the money to buy a large piece of canvas. He was a pauper!' It was evident that it was this aspect of the Dutch painter's life – his poverty, the obsession with his work, asceticism – that greatly impressed the Patriarch, and in some sense was projected onto himself.

This idealism, which by the concepts of the West effectively meant poverty, asceticism and sense of sacrifice, but also the spirituality, passion, enthusiasm and devotion to a cause bordering on fanaticism, created a certain type of person. Of course, the terrible events of the 20th century, in particular in the Soviet Union, could not fail to affect them. All their conscientious life they lived in this country, which formulated, in one way or another, their outlook, habits and mode of life. All their talent and energy they gave to the cause to which their life was devoted. Teachers in schools, lecturers in universities, trainers in Pioneers' Palaces, professors in conservatories – the majority of their names completely unknown in the West. It was to this typical group of people that Vladimir Zak belonged. The result of their work was the energy and talent of a people, restrained for decades but eventually overflowing from the Soviet Union, who earned leading positions in university departments, at chess boards, and in the concert halls of the world.

In 1988, when the Soviet Union was already beginning to break up, I was in Moscow and I telephoned Zak. That year a book dedicated to the chess of St Petersburg and Leningrad had been published, with Zak's name on

the title page. The print run of one hundred thousand was by no means rare in those times. Of course, Zak could not know that within just a few years Kortchnoi would be returning to Russia in glory, but even so he should not have participated in a book in which Kortchnoi's name was not even mentioned. Was he guided by purely practical, financial considerations? Was this yet another act of self-assertion? After all, it is well known that even the most wise succeed in ridding themselves of ambition, later than of other passions. Was this a temporary blackout, or, as Kortchnoi thinks, the beginning of his illness? The first symptoms of it are well known: forgetfulness, which gradually increases, plus vexation or aggression when it is pointed out.

In February 1993 they celebrated his 80th birthday. When I phoned him a short time later, I was told: you've got the wrong number, no one of that name lives here. After once more receiving the same reply, I turned to Spassky for an explanation. He already knew what was happening: Vladimir Grigoryevich had been moved to an old persons' refuge. He had embarked on the very last period of life, 'when everything is behind – even old age, and all that remains is senility and death'.

It is not in the traditions of Russia to move old people out of their family into an old persons' refuge. Those who live there are usually they who no longer have anyone. Besides, everyone in Russia understands what is meant by an old persons' refuge, even if you have your own room, as Vladimir Grigoryevich had in Pavlovsk. From time to time one of his pupils would visit him, but the best known of them lived far away: in France, Switzerland, Spain, America... Of course, he was no longer the Vladimir Grigoryevich whom they knew in their time, but equally he was not a vegetable, with which this type of refuge is filled in all countries of the world. He listened to the latest news, leafed through chess magazines, and sometimes even looked at something on a chess board. He was glad to receive presents, but also he often cried. Vladimir Grigoryevich had already been left by that Vladimir Grigoryevich who taught little Boris Spassky not to be afraid of losing the right to castle in the King's Gambit, but even that which remained did not want to remain any more in that refuge. He escaped from there several times, his absence was noticed, a search party was sent out, and he was brought back. Where was he going? Home? To his pupils? To his distant Berdichev childhood? Vladimir Grigoryevich Zak died on 25 November 1994.

Johan Huizinga wrote sixty years ago: 'In our consciousness play is opposed to seriousness. We can say: play is non-seriousness. But apart from

the fact that such a judgement says nothing about the positive properties of play, it is altogether very shaky. As soon as we would say instead of 'play is non-seriousness', 'play is not serious', the opposition loses its sense for us, because play can very well be serious.' Zak, one of the most outstanding trainers of the post-war period, used to present chess to a child or to a teenager as not simply a serious occupation, but even as a cause that can become the point of their entire life. In this attitude to chess, he, as a trainer, was not unique, and this attitude alone would have been insufficient. Of course, his personal qualities, his emotional nature, enthusiasm and spirituality, strengthened the belief of the young man in the high purpose of chess. But even this would not be a complete explanation.

As Taimanov remarked: 'I do not think that Zak was a high-class teacher, and he was also not a strong player, but it is noteworthy that from under his wing emerged players of completely different styles and of very high class. He must have had some secret.' Indeed – what was it? He himself was to say in his later years: 'I was simply lucky with my pupils. It all depended only on them. If they had not wanted to play, I myself would have been unable to do anything.' But even so, why him? Was it only talented pupils? Was it the times that he happened to live in? Did it all coincide? Partly. But this, I think, is not the main thing.

A mediocre teacher expounds. A good teacher explains. An outstanding teacher demonstrates. A great teacher inspires. And this, of course, applies to him. Vladimir Grigoryevich Zak was a great chess teacher.

# 'You Ask the Questions'

Semyon Furman

The tournament at Wijk aan Zee in 1977 went very well for me. I led right from the first round and only by winning his last game did Geller manage to finish level with me. Observing my games, sceptically but approvingly pursing his lips and shaking his head, he said: 'A spitting image of Syoma, it's immediately evident, the Leningrad school. It was he who taught one should play this way, in the centre.' Geller had in mind Semyon Abramovich Furman, essentially my only trainer.

At the Pioneers' Palace I did not have a permanent trainer and so when in the Autumn of 1959 in the Chigorin Club the possibility arose of studying with Furman, the decision made itself. It was a small group, three or four pupils, and it existed for some two years. During one of the first sessions he said: 'You should not ask me what you can find in openings books. That would be a waste of time.'

We made a thorough analysis of various positions, usually from the opening or the pre-middlegame, but the main attention was devoted to an analysis of our own games, first and foremost those we had lost. One day, after spending more than an hour analysing one of my games, when it appeared that all was now clear, we reached the final position where the game had been agreed drawn. The ending was as follows: four pawns against three on the kingside, with a separate passed pawn for Black on the queenside, although I, playing White, had the two bishops, against my opponent's bishop and knight. 'You know', said Furman, 'in this final position you have an advantage, and a considerable one.' We began analysing. Unexpectedly Black's passed pawn became weak, and then it was altogether lost, the white king infiltrated into the enemy position and the two bishops became rampant.

I can still see the characteristic raising of the eyebrows and the glance from under his spectacles when I showed him one of my games. 'Interesting', said Syoma, 'Who did you get this idea from?' Although I swore that I had thought it all up at the board, he insisted: 'That may be so, but all the same in your sub-conscious there remained a game seen earlier played by one of the classics.'

In my eyes he was an old man, which was probably aided by his appearance: grey and balding, which increased with age, although, to be honest, I did not then even think about his age. Anyone older than thirty

seemed to me to be already elderly. At that time Syoma was thirty-nine years old.

He was born on 1st December 1920 in Pinsk, in Belorussia, where the percentage of the Jews in towns and villages was traditionally high. His widow Alla Furman remembers: 'Syoma's parents spoke Yiddish, and he himself understood it, but no Jewish festivals or traditions were observed in the family. Syoma was also not a Party member, although he was pressed to join, and many of his tournaments and foreign trips did not take place precisely because of that.'

In 1931 the family moved to Leningrad and slightly later chess came into his life. He was a pupil of Ilya Rabinovich, a strong master of positional style. After finishing school, Syoma did not take his studies any further and started work as a fitter in a factory. Chess then engrossed him entirely. Furman's natural creative growth was delayed by the War. When he became a master he was twenty-five years old – middle-aged by the standards of today's chess players.

Speaking about those times Mark Taimanov recalled: 'Syoma and I were linked by many years of joint work, regular, everyday work. We had different approaches to chess and we found it hard to reach an agreement. We studied largely the opening, as those were the years when the basis of modern theory was only just being laid. Problematic positions arose in virtually every game and in many openings. Syoma had an excellent memory, but he never contented himself with it, trying to delve into everything himself, with his own analytical work. There were days when our analyses dragged out until midnight, but the following morning he would again be at my place. Syoma was very stubborn: often our searchings reached deep into the endgame. All the variations we checked very carefully and we recorded them in thick notebooks, accompanied for clarity with diagrams drawn by hand. I have kept these notebooks and even today I still fish out from them variations that have not lost their topicality. Syoma was a simple and uneducated person, he never studied anywhere after school. He was certainly no intellectual, but he was a very devoted friend, and, although he did not have a lot to say, he had a very good sense of humour. During USSR Championships and other tournaments to which we had to travel, we often lived in the same hotel room. It was like that for many years.'

In the USSR Championships Furman made his debut in 1948 and immediately achieved a major success when he finished in third place. Just three rounds before the end he was leading with Kotov and only a weak finish

prevented him from creating a complete sensation. That same year Botvinnik became World Champion, Keres was joining the world's élite, and the remarkable Bronstein was already vividly conspicuous. Boleslavsky was then not only a wonderful theoretician, but also a player of the highest class, Smyslov already belonged to the top, a few years later Petrosian, Geller, Taimanov and Averbakh entered the world arena, and immediately after them came the representatives of the new wave, Spassky, Kortchnoi, Tal and Stein. This list is by no means complete. Syoma regularly played in the USSR Championships, but not once was he able to emulate that first result. Furman won games against practically all of the above. They all, sitting down at the board, had to reckon with the high standard of his play. Officially, he became a grandmaster only at the age of forty-five. Today at this age many are already concluding their chess careers.

With white Furman practically always began the game with 1.d4, occasionally resorting to 1.c4 or 1.Nf3, whereas with black he played many openings, avoiding, however, those that lacked a solid centre, such as the Grünfeld, Pirc and the Alekhine Defences, and Indian set-ups. With Furman the right of the first move was a weapon of enormous penetrative power. He was especially successful in positions with a spatial advantage and central play, often developing such pressure that even the strongest players in the world were unable to escape from his clutches. But strong though Furman the player was, he was inferior to Furman the theoretician, who was without doubt one of the leading theoreticians in the world. His ideas have remained in many openings: the Nimzo-Indian and King's Indian Defences, the Sicilian and the Queen's Gambit Accepted, where one of the variations bears his name. The Breyer Variation in the Ruy Lopez was effectively created and brought into use by Furman and Borisenko in the early 50s, and so in Soviet chess literature it is known as the Borisenko-Furman Variation.

In 1959, on returning from the USSR Championship, he showed us his game with Nezhmetdinov. In a position from the King's Indian that seemed to be highly tactical in nature, he dumbfounded us by a staggering move of the rook that highlighted his positional pluses. For a few moves he strengthened his position further and went on to win in a direct attack against the black king. A year later the same manoeuvre was employed by Botvinnik in a similar position against Pachman in the European Team Championship in Oberhausen. These games and this specific manoeuvre led to the disappearance of this variation, which before was considered

perfectly playable, from tournament play, forcing Black to seek new ways in one of the main variations of the King's Indian Defence.

Furman's analyses and findings were global in character. He normally concerned himself with a concept, rather than the discovery of a particular move that would change the evaluation from slightly better to equal, or vice versa. White's entire concept of striving to control the centre with logic and clarity, were characteristic of the Furman style.

His profound understanding of chess, in particular of the opening, and the abundance of his own ideas and findings made him a desirable adviser, second or sparring-partner for many outstanding players. His services were often used by Botvinnik, who played a number of training games with him. He also helped Taimanov, Bronstein, Petrosian and Kortchnoi at various stages of their chess careers, but in all these cases he was working with an already developed high-class grandmaster. This work was largely consultative, bringing opening systems and variations up to the necessary mark, searching for new possibilities. All this changed when Furman began working with Karpov.

Tolya was then seventeen and, although he was already a master, and in spite of a rare combination of enormous talent, will-power and character, there was much in chess that he did not yet know. As observed Alla Furman: 'When Syoma was helping Botvinnik or Petrosian, he would go away to work, for a week, a fortnight or longer, but when Tolya appeared, he became everything.' Can it be said that Tolya occupied a special place in his life? 'Certainly, indisputably, he loved Tolya unreservedly. For all these ten years they were inseparable. When Syoma passed away, Tolya said that during the last ten years Syoma had spent more time with him than with me. This was true. There were endless preparations, training sessions, tournaments, trips away. He was not with his family, with his son, with me, but with Tolya.' In the teenage Karpov he saw what he himself had lacked in chess and to him he passed on everything that he knew about the game. In a way the rapidly mounting successes of Karpov were a self-reflection in chess of Furman himself.

For Anatoly Karpov their first meeting is etched in his memory: 'It is easy to establish the day when I first saw Semyon Abramovich. It was immediately after the 18th game of the Botvinnik-Petrosian match in May 1963. Furman, who was then helping Botvinnik, advised him in this game, which was adjourned, to make a draw. But Botvinnik, thinking that he stood better, began playing for a win and lost. Angered, he sent Furman to read some lec-

tures at a 'Trud' training session on the outskirts of Moscow, which I was attending. I was then not quite twelve years old. We began working together in the Autumn of 1968, when, after first entering Moscow University, I moved to Leningrad, where Furman was living. This was essentially the reason for my moving, the possibility of constant lessons and regular contact with him. There is no doubt that in my moulding as a chess player, Furman played a decisive role. It was not even that he was a universal theory expert; he had a mass of his own ideas, and he generated ideas, especially with white. He also played better with white by an order of magnitude, of perhaps even two, than with black. He had a wonderful feeling for position – during analysis he immediately saw the main line and he very much liked space. But he was also incredibly stubborn. In general this is not bad, stubbornness in analysis is something I even like, but with him it sometimes went to ridiculous lengths. On the other hand, it sometimes managed to save variations that were under terrible threat. Initially he seemed to be a placid person, but then I saw in him a great inner energy, which expressed itself not only in chess. He was also an inveterate card-player and every Autumn he went looking for mushrooms and he knew where to find them. Another ritual was feeding fish in an aquarium, together with his son. I even remember these fish, and their name has remained in my memory, guppy, although I myself was never interested in them.

'No, there were no arguments, although there was a lack of understanding when, because of his cards, I did not win the USSR Championship in Leningrad in 1971. I had the advantage in a highly important adjourned game with Savon, a considerable advantage. But Syoma played cards with Levitina until five in the morning, and then, effectively without analysing, suggested a plan. I took his advice, and I was glad to get away with a draw...'

Semyon Abramovich Furman gave the impression of being a calm, even phlegmatic person. In an early photo in 1948 he looks more like a broker on the New York Stock Exchange in the 30s, or a Hollywood actor, playing gangster roles, but when I got to know him Syoma had more the appearance of a university lecturer or the chief accountant of a building firm. He was a taciturn man. In chess circles the following sentence of his became famous: 'You ask the questions'. This is what he had said when his future wife on their first acquaintance enquired as to the reason for his silence. He spoke slowly, with a slight burr, and his movements were measured. He would unhurriedly move the pieces on the board, slowly reach for the clock button, take out a cigarette, turn on his lighter, adjust his spectacles.

But this appearance was deceptive. If it is true that the character of every person corresponds to some definite age, Syoma's age was somewhere between twenty and thirty. Those who were closely acquainted with him knew that the distinguishing feature of his nature was passion. Passion, which became apparent in everything he did, whether it was playing cards, picking mushrooms, fishing, or listening to foreign radio stations. Passion, and not far away from it on the scale of emotions, excitement and stubbornness. It goes without saying that his main passion was chess. 'You know, Alyona', Syoma said to his young wife, 'I don't know how I will be able to play chess from now on, because I love you more than chess – and I don't know how to combine these two loves...'

His passion for chess, however, did not suffer, as Alla Furman told me: 'He studied chess all the time. He liked to use a pocket set, since we didn't have much room in the house. But even without a set he was all the time thinking about chess, in the train, in the bus. I knew that look, when he listened to and did not hear what I was saying to him – he was all wrapped up in chess.'

On occasions chess would also engage him at night. In 1963 the USSR Championship, in which Furman was playing, took place in Leningrad. I went there almost every evening. In the fourth round Furman played Kholmov, who in that tournament shared first place with Spassky and Stein. Ratmir Kholmov, a player of exceptional natural talent, was famed for his indifferent attitude to opening theory and his incredible tenacity in defence. However, that evening it appeared that he would not manage to escape. It was a Furman position: a powerful centre, two bishops and growing white pressure. But somehow Furman's advantage gradually evaporated and the game ended in a draw. When I managed to find my way into the participants' room, the analysis of the game had already ended. Syoma was sitting alone in a characteristic pose, propping up the back of his head with his hand; in the other was a smouldering cigarette. 'Did you have a big advantage, Semyon Abramovich?' I asked. He looked sorrowfully at me and did not make any reply. It was evident that he had not yet switched off from the game. In a position where he felt he was winning, he had chosen the wrong plan. A few moves later the game ended in a draw. 'All night long the feeling of an unfulfilled duty did not leave me', Furman recalled the following day. 'I dropped off only towards morning, and in my sleep I finally mated Kholmov.' To prove his story he demonstrated a beautiful tactical combination that would have forced White's win.

Even after our group had broken up and the lessons had ceased, I often met Furman at competitions or in the Chigorin Club. In 1964 in the Leningrad Championship I managed to win against him in what was probably one of the best games I played in that period. Playing Black, I realised that in a theoretical battle for equality I had little chance. While we were still in the opening I sacrificed the exchange on the tenth move. I had some initiative and his king was forced to remain temporarily in the centre. It had been a correct decision, in particular from a psychological point of view. Because of his extensive knowledge and great opening erudition, bad or even inferior positions hardly ever occurred with him, and he played them less confidently. It seems to me that, for the same reason, the play of outstanding opening experts like Portisch in the 60s and 70s, and Kasparov in our time, is also weaker in inferior or slightly inferior positions. Relatively speaking of course, compared with their play when there is mounting positional pressure, a complicated middlegame, an attack with pieces, or a technical ending.

In 1966 I spent a period of active service in the ranks of the Soviet Army. Behind this official wording was concealed the reality of living at home, wearing uniform extremely rarely, and playing blitz and cards in the chess section of the Officers' Club. Sometimes this also meant playing in Army competitions for the Leningrad military district. On a sunny Spring day in 1966, my soldier colleagues in the sports brigade, Mark Tseitlin, Orest Averkin and I, received an order: to help Furman, our trainer and club colleague, to move to a new flat. I can still picture the unpretentious furnishings, the chess books, and the piles of bulletins, which were issued for any decent tournament. When by one o'clock the operation was successfully completed, Syoma said: 'This calls for a celebration.' He invited us to the prestigious 'Moscow' restaurant on the Nevsky Prospekt. 'What shall we drink, lads?' he asked. 'Whatever you like, Semyon Abramovich', we replied. A litre of vodka during the meal was easily consumed and Syoma kept up with us. In general he did not mind the odd glass. He was a sociable person and well-disposed to everyone who was well-disposed to him. At three o'clock, when we were leaving the restaurant, the contented Syoma again thanked us for our help. We too were in an excellent mood: although it was still a long time to the evening, we had finished our day's work, and the Nevsky and our whole life lay before us...

Six months later he became seriously ill. He was unable to complete a tournament and had to return to Leningrad. After losing about 40 pounds

in weight during a month, Furman had to undergo a very serious operation. I myself was now working in the Chigorin Club, and I remember taking an official written request by the Chess Federation, to various government bodies that Furman should be operated on by Melnikov, a leading-light in oncology at that time. The operation was a success, and the illness retreated, in order to return eleven years later. But these eleven years became special ones in his life, because into them came Karpov.

In the summer of 1971 in the Architects' Rest Home in Zelenogorsk outside Leningrad, I was helping Kortchnoi to prepare for his match with Geller. Living in an adjacent cottage were Furman and Karpov. Occasionally, when it was coming up to pre-dinner time, we would visit them. At the approach to the house Kortchnoi and I deliberately spoke loudly, announcing our approach, so that we would not inadvertently encroach upon their analysis. If the windows were closed, we would throw a handful of sand at them, as lovers do in old French novels. Relating to this time are four training games, played between Kortchnoi and Karpov, in which Karpov had the white pieces each time. Two games were drawn and both players won one game. This training match was a kind of prologue to the dress rehearsal, the final candidates match in Moscow in 1974, and to the fierce battles for the world championship in the Philippines and in Merano.

During these training sessions and matches, card games flourished. In the late 60s bridge came into fashion, which became one of Furman's passions. As was the case with much then in the Soviet Union, bridge was not officially banned, but it was not recommended. Bridge immediately captivated him completely, although this did not mean that other card games were forgotten; it was simply that bridge became Syoma's main card passion. In Karpov's opinion, he was never a strong bridge player, although here too he adhered to the classics and studied theory, systems and ways of bidding.

On one occasion, again in Zelenogorsk, while the adults were sitting at the card table, Furman's little son Sasha and Irina Levitina decided to try out an inflatable dinghy. The wind got up and began carrying it away from the bank. When the situation became alarming, everyone grew anxious: 'They are already a long way off, we must do something.' 'Until this rubber is completed', said Furman, 'no one is going anywhere.' Sometimes cards were replaced by dominoes. Needless to say that in this game too Syoma gave himself up selflessly. The game rarely proceeded in silence, the banging of the dominoes on the table being accompanied by appropriate

remarks, often turning into a dispute when the game had finished. Syoma could also put in a witticism, sometimes even a strong one, and he knew many anecdotes and expressions, a particular piquancy was imparted by the contrast with his professor-like appearance. At one of the Spartakiads, the Leningrad team was not performing very well, losing numerous points in matches with weaker opponents. In order to retain chances of any medals, a draw had to be gained in a hopeless adjourned position and some equal positions had to be won. The last hope was Furman, to whom all the positions were submitted, hoping for a miracle. Syoma sat there snorting for a long time, as usual raising and lowering his eye-brows in perplexity, until finally he spoke: 'Well, what can I say. You've messed things up so much, there's nothing to be done now.' The actual words he used were quite a bit stronger. Everyone burst out laughing, the lost position was resigned without playing on and draws were agreed in the equal positions.

Living out of town also opened excellent prospects for another passion of Semyon Abramovich – listening to foreign radio stations. Syoma belonged to that not altogether uncommon category of people who knew by heart the operating times of radio stations broadcasting to the Soviet Union. But whereas playing bridge was more of a prank to which they turned a blind eye, the authorities had a less tolerant attitude as regards listening to foreign radio stations. Here they took defensive measures, making reception difficult or altogether impossible by jamming. The effects of these countermeasures were felt especially strongly in urban areas, so it would be a pity, when out of town, not to make use of the opportunity. Especially since the transistor radio, imported by Syoma from abroad, had short-wave – in contrast to most Soviet radios – which significantly improved the reception quality. Understandably, this occupation was not encouraged at all, and in the strictest periods of the Soviet Union's history it was even punished, so it was always done within your own circle. Syoma would not only skilfully skip between the stations, avoiding the most noisy, but he even knew the names of the announcers, directors and authors of the programmes 'Freedom', 'Voice of America', 'BBC' and 'Voice of Israel'. Syoma listened to the radio only in Russian; a knowledge of foreign languages was not his strong point. The benefit he gained from the study of foreign languages at school, as for the overwhelming majority of his compatriots, was close to nil, and then all his free time was taken up with chess. Besides it is not easy to memorise words at an age when what you want to do is get to the essence of the things expressed by them.

After the tournament in Wijk aan Zee in 1975, together with him and Geller I gave a simultaneous display in Amersfoort. Hearing the greeting of the organisers, which as a mark of respect to the foreign guests was given in English, Syoma gently sighed: 'Mikhail Moiseevich was right...' I looked questioningly at him. Syoma explained: 'Our school in Leningrad was regarded as a chess school. Apart from me and my friend Yury Borisenko, a number of strong players studied there. In the mid-30s, after winning some strong tournament, the young Botvinnik came to give a report on it. That was how things were done then. We immediately went up to him and asked to look at something on the chess board. But he said to us: 'Study languages, lads, foreign languages. Without them it's hopeless. He was right, Mikhail Moiseevich was always right...'

Once, however, he tried to obtain information in a foreign language, hoping to hear only one name: Fischer. That was the night of 1st April 1975 near Moscow, where he and Karpov were preparing for the World Championship Match. That day the deadline expired for the submission of official applications to FIDE. The name of Fischer was not heard in the ether and two days later Euwe officially declared Karpov World Champion.

Syoma's transistor receiver helped him to endure solitude, which he always found difficult. The course extending from the ancients to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, advocating solitude but also demanding considerable inner potential, was completely foreign to him. Syoma felt best in friendly company, and dialogues with himself were replaced by the transistor, which was always with him, right up to the final hospital March days of 1978. 'What for?' Syoma asked in genuine surprise, when I suggested that he should read something that was then forbidden in the Soviet Union. 'I have my radio, so I know what's going on.'

He wrote practically nothing, with the exception of theoretical reviews in chess publications, following unconsciously the Pythagorean commandment: speak little, and write even less. But I can picture him bent low over a sheet of paper and, screwing up his short-sighted eyes, looking at the text of a game, in order to record it with his characteristic hand-writing. That is what everyone did, in that recent and so distant pre-computer era. Everyone had his notebooks with analyses, findings or simply important games, written out by hand. Kasparov also used to make such notebooks in his youth which he still had during one of his first international tournaments in Tilburg in 1981. Of course, the time wasted was terrible. Now both games and variations can be extracted from a database using a single finger and the time saved can be devoted to analysis, again with the help of the

computer. But even so, the time spent then on the restoration, collation, and even copying of variations does not seem to me to have been completely wasted. Similarly medieval monks, transferring the sacred writings onto parchment or paper, admitted them through their minds and their hearts, retaining the texts more firmly in their memories.

There is another of Syoma's rituals that comes to mind: his carefully studying the last page of the *Izvestiya* newspaper, where from time to time the foreign currency rates were published. Having been abroad, he knew how artificial the figures given there were. The rouble was a non-convertible currency. A joke which was prevalent at that time was not far from the truth: one dollar is worth a pound of roubles. I think that he simply gained pleasure from the reading of beautiful words: guilder, kroner, drachma or peso. Foreign currency had to be spent economically abroad, in order to buy goods that simply did not exist in the Soviet Union. And there were many such things. Kortchnoi remembered how Furman, at a tournament somewhere in Scandinavia, each morning bought a roast chicken, which then cost one dollar, which he would stealthily consume during the course of the day as his sole food. There was nothing shameful or unusual in this. I knew many sportsmen and musicians who during visits abroad would feed themselves for weeks on tinned food or smoked sausage taken from home to save on their foreign currency. On their return, this currency had to be exchanged for certificates or cheques which could be used in special shops where goods, mainly foreign, could be bought only by them. 'There every shop is like one of our certificate shops, only better', a grandmaster returning from a foreign tournament explained to his friends, who had never been to the West. I think that for Syoma, as for many Soviet citizens the entire West looked like one large certificate shop. He grew up with concepts such as stakhanovetes (workers helping their factories to exceed the norms), subbotniks (days of voluntary unpaid labour), political informers, personal files, restrictions on travel abroad, and many others, which were completely unknown in the West and which died together with the state that created them. Syoma, as a result of his frequent trips abroad and his regular listening to foreign radio, was familiar, if perhaps only outwardly and superficially, with the life of the other world. These two worlds easily got on in him without provoking any contradiction. He accepted them as given, as something that goes without saying, drawing a clear watershed between the one and the other. Moreover, as many others he combined the scepticism and irony with regard to the country where he lived with a fair dose of patriotism.

In December 1971 I was helping Kortchnoi during a big international tournament in Moscow. Furman was also there as Karpov's trainer, and Syoma and I lived together for the whole two weeks in the same hotel room. At the time this was considered normal. Spassky told me that, even during one of his matches for the World Championship with Petrosian, he shared a room with Bondarevsky, who was then his trainer: 'That was how it was in those times. Only later I began to understand what is meant by privacy.'

Moscow then was not the best place for evening and night-time entertainment. Therefore towards ten o'clock, our room, which was regarded as a kind of neutral territory, would see the bridge players assembling. The late Leonid Stein, Hort and Parma, occasionally Uhlmann and Kortchnoi, and sometimes Karpov would look in. Syoma, of course, was always present. I would usually lie on my bed reading, from time to time raising my head at the noise, the consequence of fierce debates, flaring up over the bridge table regarding alternatives lines of play or information incorrectly communicated during the bidding.

They usually dispersed at around three, sometimes even later. Syoma would open the window as the room would be incredibly smoky, and, returning to the real world and noticing me, he would always ask one and the same question: 'Well, Gennady, what's new in the world?' He always called me this, by my full name. Slightly glancing down, I would reply: 'How can I know what's new in the world, Semyon Abramovich, if the machine hasn't been working.' 'We'll find out now', he would reply, and, bending low over the illuminated dial, he would begin tuning the transistor to the required wavelength. Picking his way through the noise of the jamming, he would repeat: 'I wonder what Anatoly Maksimovich has in store for us tonight.' Syoma had in mind Anatoly Maksimovich Goldberg, the BBC commentator, who was exceptionally popular among underground radio listeners. If he managed to obtain more or less tolerable reception, he would suggest: 'Well, shall we have a last one?' We would each smoke a cigarette, which often turned out to be the last but one, and I, seating myself nearer to the receiver, would say: 'In Russia we all take delight – in hearing the BBC at night!' 'Shush, shush, let me listen', Syoma would bring me to order. He took this nightly ritual very seriously.

I could not imagine then that twelve years later I would be giving my first report about the Kasparov-Karpov match from the studios of the BBC in London to the Soviet Union. Although Syoma was then no longer alive, I could picture him among my imaginary listeners, when I resorted to my

favourite formula: 'As chess fans in the Soviet Union no doubt know', after which I would give some fact that they did not and could not know.

'Semyon Abramovich, you were again up all night playing cards', Karpov once reprimanded him, 'I heard Hort coming back at three o'clock, his room is next to mine.' 'Firstly, it was quarter past two when we dispersed', Syoma feebly defended himself, 'and secondly, how should I know why Hort arrived back in his room at three in the morning?' 'And the fact that you smoke shamelessly and don't stick to your diet, what about that?' continued Karpov. 'How can you say, Tolya, that I don't stick to my diet, when I bought some grapefruit yesterday. There are a couple on the windowsill here.' 'And what about the fact that in the adjourned position with Uhlmann...' Tolya did not let up. At this point I left the room, asking myself which of them, in fact, was more than thirty years older than the other.

Furman and I played two games after I had moved to the West. In both of them I had White – here I used to feel I was Furman. I still see his glance flashing from under his spectacles when in the first of them, at Wijk aan Zee in 1975, I employed an innovation on the eighth move, effectively refuting the entire variation. However, I did not manage to win the game, nor the one in Bad Lauterberg two years later, where he voluntarily went in for a position with an isolated pawn in the opening. It seemed to me that Black could not play in this way, but after spending much time and finding nothing, I offered a draw. Parrying during analysis my attempts to demonstrate an advantage for White, Syoma came out with his usual: 'Hold on old chap, I've analysed this variation', adding: 'Don't get upset, have a good look, here Black has active play.'

There in Bad Lauterberg in the mornings we would stroll about in the park, talking about this and that. Sometimes we were joined by Liberzon. Each time he saw Furman, he would let out a joyful cry: 'If Syoma is here, victory is near!' They had known each other for a long time, having met at all-union and army competitions back in the Soviet Union. 'Well, Syoma', Liberzon would usually begin, 'how is our native Soviet power?' Here he was not usually squeamish about using strong language. More often he would go off into reminiscences about the past, in which there is always something absurd, especially when this past relates to the Soviet Union. Liberzon had left for Israel only four years earlier and for him the past had not yet become final enough in order to acquire its unconditional charm. Syoma would raise and lower his eye-brows, interject retorts from time to

time, or begin to breathe heavily, which would herald laughter, growing into infectious peels, often with his head thrust forward. The few passers-by in the park of this provincial little German town would turn round and look at us disapprovingly.

Outwardly Syoma looked old: his baldness had extended, further emphasising the considerable dimensions of his forehead. His remaining hair was nearly all grey, but neither was noticeable in his spirit. According to the Greek philosopher Solon, the best period in a man's life is from thirty-five to fifty-six. If Solon had been acquainted with professional chess players of the very end of the second millennium, he would probably have thought differently, but during that tournament Furman was in fact fifty-six and he still played with great energy, taking third place ahead of many well-known grandmasters.

The tournament was won by Karpov, who finished two points ahead of Timman. It was obvious that Furman's collaboration with Karpov had proved very fruitful for both of them. Furman himself once said: 'When he is around I mobilise myself to the utmost, and play better. I won't have the same authority if I perform badly. How then will I be able to give him advice?'

On one occasion I was present during their joint analysis of an adjourned position. They had already been together for ten years and had a very close understanding. They had become accustomed to each other, in the manner of a married couple who had been living together for all that time. In Bad Lauterberg I called in to see Furman, who had caught a slight cold, and found Karpov with him.

'Our Semyon Abramovich', he said, looking into space, 'first drinks hot tea with honey, then he goes out onto the street, in the wind, and now he is complaining that he has caught a cold. It would be strange if he had not caught a cold...'

'Firstly, I did not go out straight away, but waited a while, and secondly, Tolya, I put on my woollen scarf', said Semyon Abramovich, trying to justify himself.

'He thinks that if he put on his woollen scarf...' continued Tolya, and I once again asked myself who in fact was the older of the two.

This was his last tournament and the last time I saw him.

Alla Furman said: 'Perhaps, had it not been for that nervousness and the sleepless nights, had he looked after himself more, had not smoked so recklessly, he might have avoided all that. He lived as if death did not concern him, not allowing any conversations about illnesses, not about this, not about that... He did everything that he liked.'

Unconsciously, Syoma lived following the rule of Nietzsche, which supposed that the secret of extracting the most pleasure from existence is simple: you have to live with the greatest risk for life itself, to live on the edge of the abyss. Karpov recalls: 'Three weeks before his death I was with him in the Mechnikov Hospital. He was joking, laughing, and making plans for the match with Kortchnoi, which openings to play, how and what... He did not know that his condition was hopeless, and to be honest, I also did not know.' Semyon Abramovich Furman died on 16th March 1978.

Despite the fact that his life was not a long one, I think that it was a success. If in the manner of the ancient Thracians he had placed after each happy day lived a white stone and after each unhappy day a black one, the count after his death would have given a clear result. The white colour, which he so loved in chess, would easily have predominated.

The match for the World Championship between Karpov and Kortchnoi began a few months after his death. Having been in Belgrade for the Candidates Final Match and having seen Kortchnoi's powerful play from close to, Furman undoubtedly realised that the World Championship match would not be an easy one. How would he have felt when in Baguio, apart from the real and enormous strength of his opponent, the entire power of the state machine was hurled against Kortchnoi, a part of which, one way or another, he would have had to be?

A lover of information, he would certainly have known that in January 1978 a slim 14-year-old boy from Baku won the first game in his life against a grandmaster and his first adult tournament in Minsk. But he could not know that seven years later this boy would take from his pupil the champion's title and would personally rule the chess world for the next fifteen years.

How would he have reacted to present-day chess, which is so different from the game he himself played? Chess, in which has appeared so much that is new, and which has been accelerated, punishing uncertainty but also excessive thinking in search of the best move.

What advice would he have given Karpov now? Try not to get into time trouble? Spend less time on stamps, about which Syoma grumbled to his pupil even in the best times? Increase the number of training sessions, trust more in the computer? Or simply repeat the words said in his time by the Polish master Przepiórka: 'Why do I play worse? Because I am getting old. Come on youngsters, join the fray.'

# The Maestro

Alexander Koblenz

I first met him early in the Spring of 1968, when I arrived in Riga to help Tal prepare for his Candidates Quarter-Final Match with Gligoric. After this I visited Riga many times and on each occasion I would see Alexander Koblenz. Officially he was still Misha's trainer, although eight years had passed since Tal's peak in 1960, and relations between them were no longer so untroubled. Koblenz regarded my arrival with some suspicion. He probably considered it to be another of Misha's extravagances, which in recent times had got out of hand. The several years that he had spent in Moscow after losing the return match to Botvinnik had left their mark – he was drinking terribly, smoking several packets of cigarettes a day, and there was another new lady friend, as well as that treacherous stone in his kidneys, demanding the regular summoning of first aid and the obligatory injection of morphine. And now some unknown young master from Leningrad. In short, Misha had got completely out of hand and was not listening to his old trainer, who had began working regularly with him when Misha was twelve years old. Already then he had staggered Koblenz with his amazing reactions and extraordinary speed of calculation.

Soon, however, when we became better acquainted, Koblenz realised that I had absolutely no intention of standing between him and Tal, and once and for all we established warm and friendly relations.

Misha always used to call him 'Maestro', and within a short time I too began doing so. Usually the Maestro would arrive at Misha's home, where we were working, at around three o'clock, ask what we had been looking at that day, and sometimes himself take part in the analysis. However, for the most part his appearance signified playing blitz with the loser giving up his seat. This was, of course, a euphemism, because in the overwhelming majority of cases the Maestro and I would change places. 'Indeed, an interessant move, Maestro?' Misha would ask, carrying out an unusual manoeuvre in the opening and looking slyly at me. 'Interessant, interessant', the Maestro would reply, sensing some trick, but not knowing what it comprised. His native language was German, although he spoke Russian very well, if perhaps with a slight accent. The mistakes that sometimes crept into his words were in those that were similar to German. Occasionally he would ask you to repeat something: 'Please?', which was a literal

translation of the German 'Bitte?', and which would never be said by a person whose native language was Russian.

'The girls know how to get our attention', Misha would announce, after over-optimistically sacrificing a knight on g7. If his attacking resources were insufficient, he would add, glancing at the rising flag on the Maestro's clock: 'Never mind, now we'll make his flag fall.' 'Hold on, hold on, I'll make your flag fall', the Maestro would reply, making with particular vigour the moves that seemed to him the strongest. But if the flag on his clock nevertheless fell, Misha, using the exceptionally long nail of his little finger, would click on the glass of the Maestro's clock or he would declare: 'The deceased was personally known!', lightly brushing his palms up and down. The Maestro, realising that it would be stupid to become angry, would spread his hands, and, turning to me would say, smiling: 'Well, see what you can do with him...'

After a game Koblenz would sometimes try to give the conversation a serious turn: 'Mishenka, yesterday they again phoned me from the Sports Committee and asked when you...' 'I know, I know', Misha would reply, 'I'll definitely call in next week.' 'Yes, but that's what you said last week.' 'I'll call in without fail in a day or two, but come and see now what a wonderful idea we found today in the Lopez.'

Sometimes the Maestro and I would leave together, and from Gorky Street, where Tal lived, we would turn onto Lachplesha and then right onto Lenin Street, which during the War was called Adolf Hitlerstrasse, and these days, having shaken off both of these, is trying to re-establish its former name of Freedom Street. The Maestro did most of the talking. Usually he would be complaining about Misha, his way of life, his lack of practicality, his carelessness and disorderliness. However, soon he would turn to current problems, of which there were many. He was always bursting with energy and he had numerous plans: prepare for the traditional match with Lithuania and Estonia, get Misha to study regularly with young players, in particular with the talented Vitols, prepare the text of a new book in Latvian, and arrange via Moscow an agreement regarding the translation of another book into Spanish. To say nothing of many practical matters: finish repairs to the club, arrange the production of chess knick-knacks and magnetic sets, and hire a mini-bus for regular trips to neighbouring Lithuania, where food prices were much lower. The high-quality, brown leather briefcase, which he always had with him, used to swing in time to his resilient stride. On the street he was frequently greeted, for it goes without saying that the

Maestro was a noteworthy figure in Riga – he was the trainer of a national hero.

When we reached the cross-roads, the Maestro would suggest: ‘Perhaps you’d like to call in for a minute?’ The chess club in the very centre of Riga was his special pride. We climbed up to the second floor. In the club there was still a smell of fresh paint, but along the wall was already stretched the inscription ‘Chess is the gymnastics of the mind. V.I. Lenin’. This slogan could be seen in almost every club in the Soviet Union. The citation, however, is hard to find even in the complete collection of Lenin’s works. This is not surprising, as it was thought up by the well-known Soviet chess official Yakov Gerasimovich Rokhlin, who died a few years ago. Still, Lenin genuinely loved chess and he sometimes played during his Siberian exile and in his years abroad. Anyway, it was a splendid find, no one got around to checking the authenticity of the phrase, it sounded very Lenin-like, and it did much to assist the development of chess in the country, especially in the initial decades of Soviet power.

‘Come in, come in’, invited the Maestro, flinging open the door of the director’s office, ‘take a seat.’ ‘What’s that you have hanging there, Maestro? It’s not enough for you to have an inscription by the entrance, now you also have this’, I said, pointing with my eyes above the director’s chair where there was hanging a bas-relief of Lenin, made out of wood, and, it has to be acknowledged, very skilfully. The Maestro liked my comments and a cunning smile appeared on his face. But, although there only the two of us in his office, he sighed with a feigned tone of censure: ‘Well, what can you expect from this man? There’s only one word for him – Leningrad riff-raff.’ And, changing the subject: ‘Genya, what are you doing this evening?’ He always called me this, strongly softening the final vowel, which imparted to the name almost a shade of endearment. ‘Ah, off to the restaurant with Misha. That’s an original idea. I take it that yesterday you went to the library.’ And the Maestro sadly shook his head...

He was then fifty-two years old and he looked highly imposing: of above average height, a stately figure, perhaps a little on the plump side, but always smart, always in a suit and tie. With a round face, high forehead, combed-back hair touched with grey, a prominent, aquiline nose and full lips, he resembled some kind of rare animal. The smile, which often appeared on his face, completely transformed him. The cunning concealed in his widely-spaced eyes gradually enveloped his entire face and the Maestro was transformed into the pupil of the German secondary school in Riga, Alik Koblenz.

He was born in Riga on 3rd September 1916 into a prosperous Jewish family. At home they spoke Yiddish, but Koblenz received a classical education and German was his strongest language. His father, a timber merchant, wanted, of course, that after finishing school his son should continue his studies and then, who knows, take over the business, but the young Koblenz already had something else in mind. At the age of twelve he had discovered by chance on a bookshelf the chess primer by Dufresne. It goes without saying that when he decided to devote his life to chess his father was against it. 'He told me about the experiences of his timber-trade acquaintance Isaiah Nimzowitsch, who he had met at the Riga exchange', the Maestro later recalled. 'His son Aron used to sit for days on end in the exchange café, playing amateurs for stakes. Isaiah sent his son to Zurich University, but he abandoned his studies and became a chess professional. My father heard how colleagues, trying to wound the old man Nimzowitsch, would say: 'How was it, Mr Nimzowitsch, that in your respectable family there appeared such a tramp?'

Indeed, the decision taken by the young Koblenz to deviate from the well-trodden, traditional path and to become a chess professional, was no less risky than it is in our days. Towards the end of his life the Maestro wrote: 'One remembers the barriers that always stand in the path of the enthusiast, the warning voices of those close: don't have your head in the clouds, and – the main thing – choose a 'solid' profession. 'You, young man, are intending to devote your whole life to chess?' Milan Vidmar asked me at the Warsaw Olympiad in 1935. After receiving an instant reply in the affirmative, he looked at me thoughtfully and said: 'Well, we'll see...' At the basis of the young Koblenz's enormous temptation to turn away from the well-trodden path and determine his own fate lay his love for chess, for the very process of the game.

His decision also signified something else: independence and freedom, visits to various European countries from little Latvia and meetings with interesting people. In 1935 Koblenz faced the choice between playing in an international tournament in Helsinki, or travelling as correspondent of a Riga newspaper to Amsterdam, in order to report on the World Championship Match between Alekhine and Euwe. He unhesitatingly chose Holland, and this decision largely determined his later fate: he not only played in tournaments, but also wrote about chess. He began writing his first chess book in Latvian when he was nineteen years old, and while working on his last one, death caught up with him.

Latvia was then an independent state, and the chess player and chess journalist Koblenz was seen not only in Amsterdam, but also in Hastings, London, Madrid, Warsaw and Milan. Koblenz's knowledge of many languages made these frequent trips even more pleasant. He watched and conversed with Mieses, Tartakower, Capablanca, Spielmann and Euwe, and he knew Lasker well and interviewed him several times. Youth, which is considered the best time of life, probably because one does not think about this at all, in his case was full of meetings with many remarkable people in various cities of Europe. He lived for some time in Spain, and in 1939 he spent more than six months in London, sitting for days in the Gambit chess café on Cannon Street. Playing for stakes, sleepless nights, a shaky existence, but on the other hand one's favourite game and freedom, and a future, about which one does not think and which has no end. Many years later, when I used to converse with him, he was perhaps the only person I knew in the Soviet Union who did not refer to foreigners in the third person plural – in his past life he had also been one of them.

This may also explain a seemingly strange hobby of Paul Keres. He knew by heart the departure times, flight numbers, names of the companies and connection possibilities of planes flying from London to Madrid, Amsterdam to Paris, or, for example, Stockholm to Berlin. Was this only a demonstration of his memory in an unusual wrapping? I imagine that for him these names were not so much reminiscences of his youth, but rather of the times when reaching these points in Europe was merely a question of moving in space, of which he was deprived after Estonia became one of the republics of the Soviet Union.

In 1940 Soviet troops entered Latvia. A year later the country was occupied by Germany. Koblenz succeeded in escaping to the East, but his mother and sisters perished in the Riga ghetto...

Mark Taimanov recalls: 'I met him on a steamer which was travelling from Krasnovodsk to Baku, I think it was in 1943. Koblenz, in some unthinkable plus-fours and a wide-brimmed hat, with a Latvian passport on the back of which stood out an emblem very similar to a swastika, made a picturesque spectacle. It was war time, however, and he could have had a mass of problems.' Later the Maestro himself described this episode: 'A very young lieutenant who was checking documents held in his hands my passport with its London and Barcelona visas, listened to my accent, and by his fervent look I saw that mentally he was already pinning to his tunic the Order of the Red Star for catching an important spy. Fortunately, I had

with me a copy of the newspaper *Soviet Sport* where my name appeared in a list of the new Soviet masters.'

Koblentz spent almost the entire war in Samarkand, where he earned himself a living by giving simultaneous displays in military hospitals, but mainly by performing in concerts. The Maestro began studying singing when he was still in Riga. In 1938 he spent some time in Milan, where he played in a tournament, in order to have a few lessons from famous belcanto teachers. He had quite a pleasant tenor voice and Neapolitan songs remained in his repertoire from those times. Later the Maestro would sing for his friends, or at the closing ceremonies of tournaments, always doing this with great pleasure. But his greatest success belongs to that war time, when, not fully mastering the subtleties of the Russian language, in a Neapolitan song, instead of the words 'Ah, why were you distressed?', he sang: 'Ah, why were you undressed?' He had to give an encore...

After the war Koblentz returned to Riga. He was nearly thirty and he was at his peak as a chess player. In 1945 he reached the final of the USSR Championship, which in itself was a considerable achievement. A few names suffice to give an impression of the strength of the tournament: Botvinnik, the future winner, Smyslov, Boleslavsky, Bronstein, Tolush and Kotov. But even the championship semi-final, where several grandmasters competed with experienced masters, was a very strong tournament. 'For me the semi-final is the final', said a master who was by no means a weak player.

In those years Koblentz several times won the Latvian Championship. He was quite a strong master, with interesting ideas in the opening and a clear leaning towards tactical play. There is no doubt that his opponents, brought up on the games of Chigorin and Botvinnik and having studied chess as a science, regarded his play and his entire approach to chess somewhat sceptically, as it was based more on flashes of inspiration and endless blitz games in the chess cafés of London, Vienna and Madrid. And then there was he himself: slight accent, constant smile on his face, openness, good nature, tie, handkerchief in his breast-pocket. All this somehow did not blend in with the severe atmosphere of the post-war years.

In 1946 in a tournament in Leningrad Koblentz got into time trouble in one of his games. The Maestro, assuming that he and his opponent were engaged in a common purpose, only he had got into a slight difficulty which they should both overcome, became very nervous, not knowing how many moves he had to make before the time control. 'Four', his opponent helped him, courtesy itself. When the moves were made, and the

Maestro caught his breath, the opponent, after the fall of the flag, without waiting for the interference of the arbiter, coldly remarked: 'I made a mistake. You had five moves to make. You have lost on time.' 'You did not act like a gentleman', the Maestro remarked reproachfully. 'What do you have in mind?' severely asked the tournament director, who had been standing alongside and had observed the entire scene. The quick-witted Maestro, who had already lived in the Soviet Union for several years, emerged from the situation with honour: 'I had in mind that he did not act like a Soviet gentleman', he replied. Although it was already after the war, you could never know how and by whom your words would be misconstrued. Incautious remarks at the beginning of the war cost the outstanding Riga grandmaster Vladimir Petrovs, who the Maestro knew well, exile to a Siberian camp and his life.

After the war the Maestro settled in a flat in the house which until 1940 belonged entirely to his family. What did he feel about this? After all, even the ancients knew that it is different not to have something at all, than to have it and lose it. 'I used to stay with him in Riga almost every year', said Mark Taimanov. 'The flat was full of books in various languages: they were lying everywhere, on windowsills, in the corridor, in the kitchen. The master of the house was charming in the extreme and possessed a highly artistic nature. He was quite a European person, who had no exaggerated perceptions of his Jewishness. Still, at the end of every conversation, whatever the subject, Alik would always ask: 'But tell me, how will this concern the Jews in Riga?''

In the late 40s a meeting with a thin little boy with penetrating black eyes was to have a decisive influence on the Maestro's life for many years. This boy was called Misha Tal. He began to visit Koblenz at home and at his dacha. The lessons became regular, often lasting many hours. Already evident then was his sharp combinative vision, lightning calculation of variations, and, most importantly, his selfless fascination with chess. I think that these years, up to Tal winning the title of World Champion in 1960, were the most fruitful and the happiest in Koblenz's life. He understood very well his role in the relationship between mentor and pupil, citing on many occasions Heinrich Neuhaus, the teacher of the great Sviatoslav Richter: 'Geniuses cannot be created, only the grounds for their development.'

The functions of trainer and mentor gradually expanded to adviser, sparring-partner, second, psychologist and manager. But in particular the Maestro was a devoted friend to Misha. Vasily Smyslov noted: 'Koblenz

greatly loved Misha. Always, and I saw them together at many tournaments, he genuinely suffered for him and supported him in every way. That meant a great deal.'

For Tal he was in some sense a father or uncle, as similarly in their time were Tolush and Bondarevsky for Spassky. The latter was even called 'father' by Spassky. The fact that Tolush and Bondarevsky were top-class grandmasters, whereas Koblenz was only a master, did not play any great role. This kind of lively, human contact is very important for a young man, not only on the way to the master or grandmaster title, but also after that. Even if today any information can easily be found and processed using a computer. Here an analogy with music suggests itself. Today it does not present any problem to obtain not only an aural impression, but also a visual picture of outstanding modern musicians. Nevertheless, the popularity of master classes continues to grow, where direct individual contact not only leads to better understanding, but also inspires the pupil. The absence of such a constant contact has always been noticeable in the play of even the strongest chess players from the West. They learned largely from one another and this was a hindrance on the path to their further successes.

Initially Koblenz was a good trainer for Tal, even when in the mid-50s the student had surpassed his teacher in practical play, and then he was also a good second, which is not one and the same thing. His charm, constant smile and jokes, his deliberate playing of the simpleton, was seized on and maintained by Misha. His saying 'If Tal has an open file, there will be mate', which, incidentally, at that time often was the case, was taken literally by many, and by journalists in particular. They saw the Koblenz-Tal relationship only in company, only in jokes and banter, and did not know or guess about the great amount of hard work and the inner harmony between them.

When Tal demonstrated a pretty combination or simply during a joint analysis, the Maestro would often exclaim: 'Misha, you play like a genius!' In reply to which Misha would assume a falsely modest, coquettish pose and, waving his arm, would say 'I know!' This act, performed many times before spectators and journalists, created the image of some kind of flatterer-joker, which the Maestro was not. Even in the joke of Ivkov at that time: 'Do you know how Koblenz trains Tal? The whole day he repeats over and over again: Misha, you play like a genius!', one can find rehashes of this, their joint image. The Maestro turned a deaf ear to all this, but sometimes, when he had been stung to the quick, he would nevertheless

argue with journalists, forgetting the wise rule of Disraeli: Never complain, never explain.

In the Tal family, Koblenz was sometimes called 'Alik is not a fool', words heard from adults discussing some action of the Maestro by Tal's five-year-old son Gera and repeated by him in the presence of Koblenz himself. Many saw him as being a crafty dodger, who had drawn the winning ticket in a lottery, not realising that in some respects both he and Misha had drawn one common ticket.

From the moment of their greatest triumph – Tal's winning of the World Championship – relations between him and Koblenz began to fluctuate wildly. In Riga and Moscow in the late 60s, I too often witnessed how the Maestro would reprimand Misha for something, and, it has to be admitted, almost always justifiably, in reply to which Misha would make some joke, or light up another cigarette. Serious conversations in the presence of others were simply not permitted. Misha could unexpectedly ask, for example: 'Maestro, how was it, strictly speaking, that the Civil War in Spain began?' The Maestro, taken unawares, would try to defend himself: 'But I've already told you about that.' 'I don't remember', Misha would say cunningly, 'and Genna here doesn't know anything about it at all.' 'Very well', the Maestro would agree submissively, 'it was in 1936, and I had already been living there for six months. Ah, what a life it was then.' Here the Maestro would sigh. 'Banderilleros, castanets and The Naked Maja?' Misha tried to divert him. 'I already spoke Spanish quite well and had played in various small tournaments', the Maestro did not deviate, 'and in July I found myself in Barcelona, where an international tournament was due to take place. I remember that already we had all assembled, apart from Alatorsev, whose arrival was expected. In the evening the participants were seated at a large table in a restaurant...' 'With a glass of yoghurt?' asked Misha. 'After the meal someone brought some clocks, we played blitz and drank wine...' 'Aha', Misha again interrupted. 'And we sat there until late', continued the Maestro, not paying any attention to him. 'And suddenly, nearly morning, when we had already decided to disperse, there began such shooting, such shooting.' 'And what was that?' helped Misha, who had already heard this story many times. 'That was how the Civil War began in Spain', concluded the Maestro in a deliberate voice. He used to play the role assigned to him, knowing full well that, if he and Tal were not alone together, there could be no question of either any serious questions, or any serious analysis.

Of course, the nuances of their relationship were largely determined by the country in which they both lived, which created its own rules of play. But in the main, having known each other for practically all their lives, they could not be separated by anything. Koblenz always remained for Tal the beloved Maestro, and Tal for him was Mishenka, beginning from the moment when he first saw him as a little boy in 1948, even to the final minutes in June 1992, when tears welling up in his eyes kept him from uttering the final words of parting at Tal's funeral.

Koblenz's activity was not restricted to working with Tal. He loved chess in all its manifestations. He took part in the creation of the magazine *Sahs* in Latvian and Russian, which had an enormous circulation for a chess magazine of 68,500 copies. He was trainer of the Latvian team and director of the Republic's chess club, to say nothing about the large number of books that he wrote.

It would be wrong to think that the Maestro was some kind of altruist, who while working forgot about his own interests. Enthusiasm, passion and energy were combined in him with a practical vein and a pragmatic approach to life. I think that, were the Maestro to have ended up on an island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, within a couple of years the first chess championship would have been held there. Plans would be also have been made for a team championship, junior chess schools would be functioning, as would a higher master school, where the Maestro himself would read lectures, and note would have been made of an especially bright lad with coarse curly hair. The Maestro himself would be well in with the main administrator of the island, who would also have been taught to play. Moreover, a small booklet with his first combinations would already be on sale. It would be hard to say what the Maestro in fact thought about him. Although he was completely fluent in the local dialect, at his home they preferred to speak Yiddish. In souvenir kiosks, along with place-mats with drawings of a chess board and knight heads, skilfully chiselled by local craftsmen, one would also be able to buy beautifully produced books of the Maestro himself, assisting the development of combinative vision. Young trainers, who in their time had been pupils of the Maestro, would, it is true, whisper behind his back that his methods were hopelessly outdated, and that the Maestro's three-storey villa directly on the banks of the ocean was a genuine palace. It was even said that the bottom of the fair-sized swimming pool was laid in black and white tiles. Of course, these rumours would reach the Maestro, but he would not pay

any attention to them. All his time would be spent preparing for the match with the largest island of the archipelago, in which he was confident of victory, and then, who knows, even to the continent it was not so far.

We spent two weeks together in Moscow in the summer of 1968 at the Candidates Semi-Final Match between Tal and Kortchnoi, where the Maestro was Tal's trainer and I was his second. In a match which initially went hopelessly, a glimmer of hope suddenly appeared, the battle became more complicated, and the tension fell only with the last move. Chess took up nearly all our time, and now I regret that I did not ask him about much that would be interesting now. On the other hand the Sosonko of those times had little in common with the author of these lines, apart from having the same name.

After I left the country we regularly exchanged greetings, most often via Tal, and in 1979, I think it was, playing in the Bundesliga and whiling away some time waiting for a train to Amsterdam on the station of some German town, I remembered his smile and, hoping that he would understand who had written it, sent him a postcard with an unsigned message, repeating, however, on the other side of it in German: 'Grüsse aus Koblenz'.

The break-up of the Soviet Union in the late 80s began in the Baltic states. In Latvia the nationality question was especially critical. Human and professional qualities were pushed into the background. The 400-year-old law of the Swedish king Gustav II Adolph (Latvia was then part of the Swedish empire) unexpectedly became topical again: '...that no Jews and foreigners to the detriment of the citizens of Liflandia should be tolerated'. In the late 80s, Koblenz, who had written his first book in the Latvian language more than fifty years earlier, was not given a place in the new chess federation. He took this very much to heart and he even became ill. He was by now over seventy, but the Maestro still had a child-like longing for gratitude in general, and of public gratitude in particular. He was a passionate man of diverse talents, which in many, more down-to-earth people provoked a feeling of envy or annoyance.

In 1991 Koblenz left Riga, where he had been born and had lived his entire life, for Germany. German was his language, his son too had already been living there for a long time, but this world 'without Russia's and Latvia's', looked different from the one he had known more than fifty years earlier. He did not emigrate in the unconditional meaning of this word, since from time to time the Maestro was seen in Riga. 'I have gathered

nearly all the documents confirming the rights of our family to the house', he wrote to me during that time, 'apart from one about the death of my mother in the ghetto...'

In the late 80s we again established contact. There was a frequent exchange of letters and telephone calls, especially after he moved to Berlin. He sent me his latest books, all with warm inscriptions, made in beautiful script.

In these books, along with citations of great chess players on various aspects of the game, one comes across the views of Kant, Goethe and Schopenhauer. His books have been published in many languages: about his work with Tal, a chess primer, about combinations, and finally, a last series of books, published in Berlin: *Training with Alexander Koblenz*. Tal named Koblenz's primer *School of Chess* among the books that had the most influence on him. I do not think that this was merely a polite compliment to his trainer and mentor. The book is indeed a good one: large format, splendidly published, but most importantly, written with talent and with love.

The primers, his trainer's diaries, his psychological searchings and his book of memoirs make interesting reading, in particular because of that warm feeling for chess and for the people linked with the game. Under his pen any story, even a rather commonplace one, would assume the colours of a Persian fairy-tale, and the heroes of the narrative would take on the features of Sinbad the Sailor. Even so, these books relate more to the genre of operetta, rather than opera, and do not achieve a very high level, mainly because Koblenz was by nature more of a person of energy and action, than contemplation, thought and analysis.

Usually the Maestro would reply to my letters the same day. He wrote in almost conversational language: 'Well, Genya, I received your letter, and do you know what I have been thinking about...', which would mainly consist of ideas, plans and projects. This is typical of youth, but even at his seventy-five years the Maestro was young. Whatever he did, he regarded each of his aims and tasks as a step and he never sat down to rest on them. He was full of energy and in everything he radiated *joie de vivre*. He had the laugh of someone who enjoyed life in a childlike manner and he loved to be surprised by this life. He retained that same friskiness, that same call to action, to changes, that same dislike of boredom and rest. The very state of rest was completely foreign to him. I think that he unconsciously thought that here on earth there should not be any rest, regarding life as an approach to a goal, which could never be fully achieved.

His idea to come to Amsterdam for several months was not carried out. Yet, he talked about it as if the match Alekhine-Euwe was still being played, as if Tartakower was still spreading out his sheets with variations in the press centre, in order to convey them to newspapers throughout the world, as if there was still the possibility of interviewing Lasker, and to Vidmar, on meeting him in the foyer, he could say that a life devoted to chess was a success. He spoke about them as of living people, with whom for some reason he was deprived of the opportunity for direct contact, a feeling that I now experience with regard to him.

In 1991 in Berlin the first issue of *Schach-Journal* was published, with Koblenz as editor-in-chief. And he himself wrote in it about the training process, the psychology of play. I am afraid that these articles are of interest now only to a historian. Today's chess differs too much from the game that the Maestro played in the cafés of London and Madrid, and also from the chess of the USSR Championships, won by Tal forty years ago.

The Maestro's story of how he accidentally hit upon the variation of the French Defence that was communicated to Tal only half an hour before the first game of the World Championship match against Botvinnik in 1960 provokes a smile. Crawling on all fours among the theoretical bulletins laid out on the carpet of his hotel room he found it by chance, and Tal employed it brilliantly. This story now sounds no less amateurish than the dialogue between Steinitz and Gunsberg during the 12th game of their World Championship Match of 1891. After playing the opening moves of an Evans Gambit, Steinitz, with Black, asked his opponent: 'Do you think that I am morally obliged to choose the same defence as in my match with Chigorin?' 'You are not obliged', replied Gunsberg, 'but the public expects that you will try to defend your theory.'

The death of Tal in 1992 changed the entire tone of his life. From that time Misha became one of the main topics of his letters. The Maestro's words about my posthumous article on Tal: 'lively, sincere, warm', were more precious to me than any others. He himself began to prepare an article about Tal for *New In Chess*: 'I have thought about it very seriously. I want to show my intimate perception of Misha, the problem of giftedness, the prediction of it, the connection of a trainer with a gifted person, his ability to keep in the background, but simultaneously to have a positive influence. The world does not understand that, apart from useful pieces of advice or the supplying of opening ideas, the most important thing that a trainer must do is to resolve the problem of his player's loneliness, become a sin-

cere friend, a therapist, as Misha in one interview half-jokingly called me. I want to dispel the myth of the Mozart-like easiness of his play and demonstrate his enormous efforts and bitter tears. I will cite chess material to confirm these psychological hypotheses. The only thing I have not decided is in what language to write, German or Russian. Something inside me inclines towards Russian, but I see your derisive but good-natured smile. I think that you will excuse my boldness in writing in Russian, believing me when I say that I do not consider myself a Pushkin, and, you know, frankly speaking not even a Chekhov.'

Or from another letter: 'At last my final, but global idea is taking shape. I have set up an international correspondence academy in Riga named after Mikhail Tal. The name of Tal will not be forgotten, and through it we will proclaim the beauty and depth of his play.'

In this remaining short period of his life I began calling him Alik, not because Maestro was Misha's expression and should have remained so, but rather because light-heartedness and frivolity had become somehow inappropriate and incorrect.

This is from his very last letter: 'The years pass, and ever closer is the prospect of the next life. True, in my memoirs there will be a chapter: a letter from the next world. This will be the most cheerful piece of the book!' And at the very end: 'With me, of course, it is a tragedy. So much material and so many thoughts have been gathered, that they are bursting to come out. I am dying in an abyss of ever new welling ideas, but now I will finally stop and begin taking stock.' The flood of ideas ceased on 8th December 1993 in Berlin. The stop was placed by death and there was no one to take stock.

I will nevertheless try. For two thirds of his life the Maestro was a citizen of the USSR, probably the most artificial creation in recent history, which, despite its political groundlessness, or perhaps thanks to it, gave birth to more human types than any other country in Europe, with the exception perhaps of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of the nineteenth century. If, of course, one regards the Soviet Union as a completely European country.

Who then was Alexander Koblenz? Despite the fact that he was born and lived his whole life in Riga and had a complete mastery of the Latvian language, he was not, of course, Latvian.

Although in most of his life he spoke Russian and had a splendid knowledge of Russian literature and culture, it goes without saying that he was not Russian.

Despite the fact that he went to a German school and spoke excellent German, and despite moving to Berlin for his very last years, he was not, of course, German.

Jewish by birth, with a mother and sister who perished in the ghetto, he was also not totally Jewish, since questions of religion and questions associated with what is usually called national consciousness, did not interest him.

For the greater part of his life the Maestro lived in the Soviet Union. In order to function normally in that country he had to wear a mask, as did many in those times; it was desirable not to remove it – even at night – in order not to be in constant conflict with yourself. In this case, it is true, the mask could accrete with the face, when it was already difficult to separate the one from the other. Koblenz's reminiscences of Tal written for *New In Chess* were full of Soviet terms, concepts, and names of people that were known only in the Soviet Union, to such an extent that the project had reluctantly to be rejected: commentaries and footnotes would have exceeded the size of the article itself. I think that not every paragraph of his book devoted to the flourishing of chess in Soviet Latvia was written to conform to the rules of Soviet society. I also do not consider that the description of the first championship of the Latvian Soviet Republic, flooded with the light of the crystal chandeliers in the hall of mirrors of the former Riga stock exchange, is insincere, or that the words 'chess in our republic, from being a hobby of lone people, is now being transformed into a genuinely mass game, and will take an honourable place in the cultural life of the republic' were just an obligatory cliché. Finally, he could not have attained his social position and his name if Latvia had not been a Soviet republic. But for all that, the Maestro was not, and could not be a Soviet.

Born a Baltic Jew in Riga, a city that has long stood at the intersection of different cultures, Latvian, German, Russian and Jewish, he was, of course, a cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world. But the Maestro's cosmopolitanism was not only the result of a series of biographical accidents – it stemmed from his very nature.

Despite the tragic events of the twentieth century, which personally affected him and his family, despite a lengthy series of losses and difficult blows of fate, looking back on his life and adopting Aristotle's definition of happiness, 'to be able to exercise without hindrance one's abilities, whatever they be', one can say that the Maestro lived a happy life, and was able to retain the ideals of youth, an open disposition, and cordiality.

And yet, if we take stock, is there not too much in the negative balance? The chess club in the centre of Riga no longer exists and its building, altogether in the spirit of the times, has been occupied by a bank. The magazine *Sahs*, which started in Latvia in 1959, is no being longer published. The same fate has befallen the magazine in Berlin that Koblenz was the editor-in-chief of, and neither is there an academy named after Tal. His books, supplanted by numerous opening guides, are known only to connoisseurs. Koblenz himself had the bitter fate of outliving, even if not by long, his brilliant pupil.

In his youth, between what was known in chess, and what was not known, lay a broad field, belonging to art and improvisation. It was for this part, strictly speaking, that Koblenz fell in love with chess. This field was full of mistakes, naïve impressions and emotional delusions. It has now been reduced considerably and the mistakes have gone, but the aura and the halo of the game itself have also largely gone. Man, armed with a computer, is close to solving the final truth in chess, but will it prove interesting? I am not at all sure that, if the graduate of the Riga German school again had to decide what career to choose in this modern era, he would again choose chess.

And the last thing: what was it, after all, that drove him? What was it that wound up this spring, which in defiance of logic and common sense did not allow him to rest? Which led him into chess, separating him from the measured tread of his father and subsequently also his son, who was so distant both from the game of chess, and from his father's child-likeness and enthusiasm? Where is the explanation for this?

In Moscow, towards the evening of a sultry July day in 1968, I was standing by the entrance to the Peking Hotel, where the trainers, seconds and participants of the Tal-Kortchnoi match were living. The previous day the closing ceremony of the match had taken place, and later the feasting had gone on deep into the night. Unexpectedly I saw the Maestro heading in my direction. He looked at me critically and did not respond as usual to my smile. 'Well', he said, 'you look great.' I did indeed look rather baggy-eyed. 'Would you like to know what is the meaning of life?' he suddenly asked. Dumbfounded by the question, I looked at him without replying. 'I'll tell you', he continued. 'You probably think in terms of pleasures, of parties? Is that what you think?' I continued saying nothing, since, to be honest, I did not even use to think about life, this jolly, and more important, endless substance. 'You are probably wondering 'why is he so excited

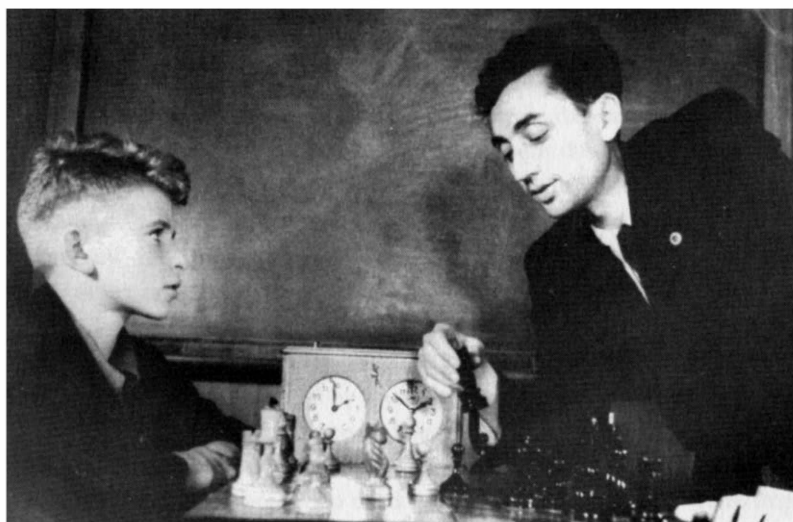
today?’ You are thinking, of course, will you manage to get to the football match today?’ I lifted my head: the Maestro had read my thoughts. I had never before seen him like this. ‘I’ll tell you what. Creativity – that is what’, he triumphantly stated, ‘yes, creativity, and everything else...’ He again looked me up and down.

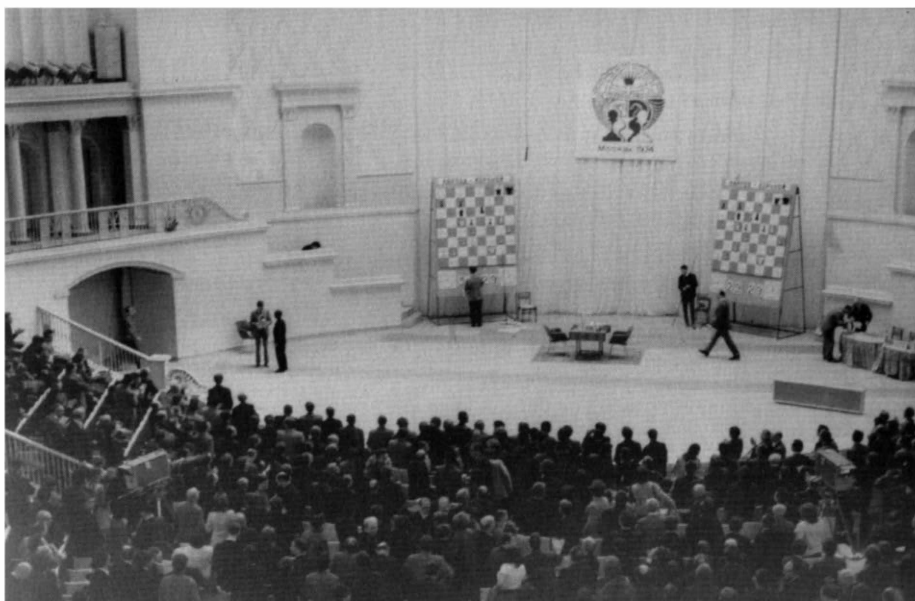
He himself had named the word – the impulse, the feeling that drove him all his life. This feeling is not given to everyone, sometimes it disappears together with youth, and almost always it dries up by old age. That was not the case with the Maestro. This feeling is, of course, a gift. He retained this gift in his restless genes until his death: the endless joy of creativity.



above: Vladimir Zak in the '40s.

below: Zak with the young Boris Spassky.





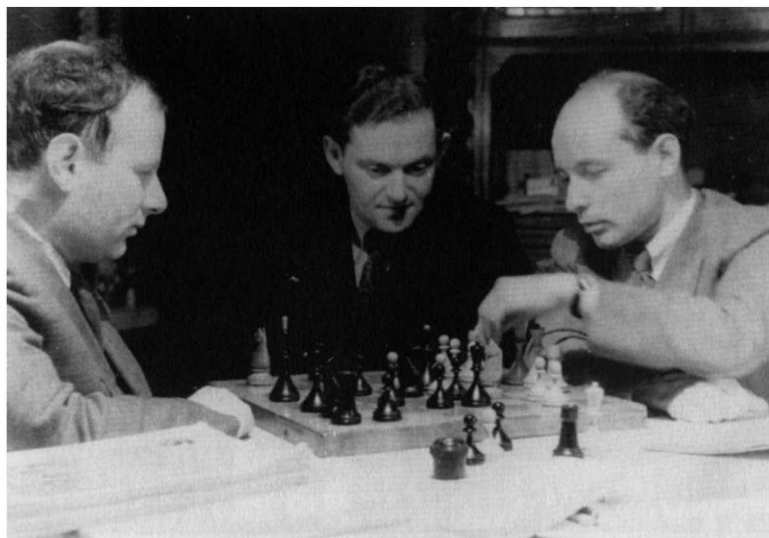
top: Spassky and Kortchnoi, sitting in front of Vladimir Zak's picture at the Chigorin Chess Club in St. Petersburg in 1997.

bottom: a large crowd had turned up to witness the match Karpov-Kortchnoi, Moscow 1974.



above: Furman at the age of 28.

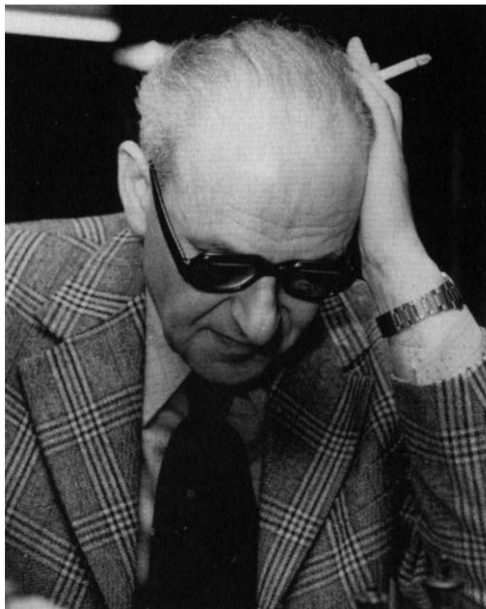
below: Boleslavsky, Furman and Bronstein during the 1949 Soviet Championship.

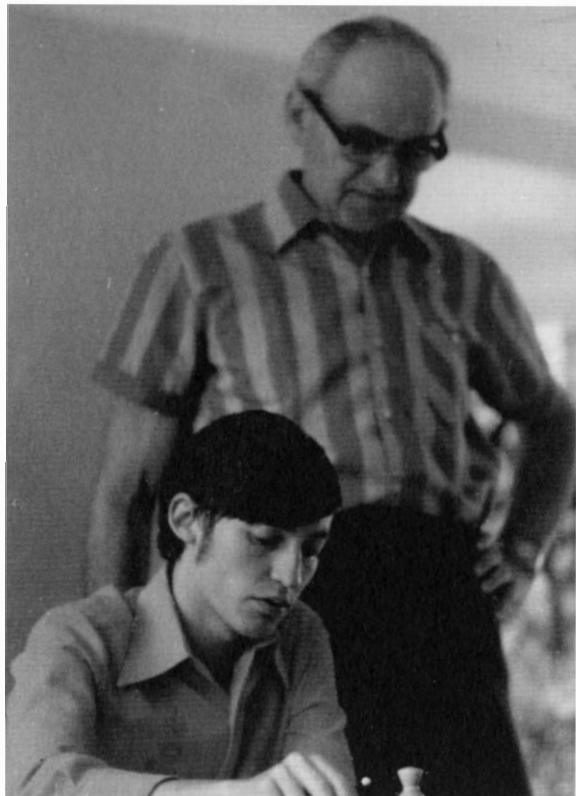




left: Ratmir Kholmov  
and Furman at the 1963  
Soviet Championship.

below: Furman in Wijk  
aan Zee in 1975.





above: Karpov with his trainer Furman in the early '70s.

below: Koblenz faces Aivars Gipslis in a Latvian championship in the '50s.





top: Koblentz joins Tal and Botvinnik in their post-mortem analysis during the 1960 World Championship match.

bottom: Tal with his trainer Koblentz.

# The Jump

Alvis Vitolins

‘That will probably be Alvis’, said Tal, hearing the bell and tearing himself away from the analysis to open the front door. ‘We agreed yesterday to play a few blitz games.’ The time was the summer of 1968. The place was Riga, Tal’s flat, where I was helping him to prepare for his Candidates semi-final match with Kortchnoi.

Into the room came a very tall young man, leaning forward somewhat with a slightly rocking gait, a rather sullen appearance, with a high retreating forehead and a vacant stare directed somewhere into space. It was Alvis Vitolins.

We were already acquainted. Several years earlier at some tournament in Leningrad we had played a game. In an initially equal ending with opposite-colour bishops Vitolins had developed a strong initiative and it appeared that things would turn out badly for me. In addition I was short of time and I grew very nervous. At this point Vitolins offered a draw: he did not want to play on my time trouble. After stopping the clocks, he began demonstrating some far from obvious variations, where Black would hold the position.

That day Tal and Vitolins played blitz until late in the evening, as occurred on other days too. Tal, one of the greatest experts of his time at lightning play, won more frequently, of course, but often, normally with white, Alvis would succeed with brilliant attacks, the outlines of which I still recall. It was then that I really understood what the superb tactician Tal had in mind when, in analysis, he would sacrifice material for the initiative and become animated: ‘Well, now let’s play like Vitolins...’

Alvis Vitolins was born on 15th June 1946 in Sigulda, in the environs of Riga. The boy was nine years old when his father took him to his first trainer, Felix Tsirtsenis. Vitolins’ talent was obvious and within a few years he was to become one of the strongest juniors in the USSR.

‘He was the best of us’, recalls Yuri Razuvaev. ‘Alvis always shone in the all-Union junior competitions. It was no accident that he was also one of the first to become a master. Already then Vitolins had a very subtle sense of equilibrium in chess. When it was disturbed, a piece initiative in his hands became a decisive factor.

‘He was very tall and we gave him the nickname ‘Dlinny’ (lanky). There was something special in Alvis – the kind of biological phenomenon of a

winner, of a person who had a different perception of chess. It is probable that something similar was felt by the opponents of Fischer, to whom, incidentally, he was similar in his entire appearance. But even then it was already apparent that he was naïve, unusual, and absorbed in himself.

A typical scene of those years: at a junior training session Vitolins, the chess hope of Latvia, is having a fight with Vooremaa, the Estonian player. One can imagine what kind of feelings they experienced towards Russia and the Soviet Union. The physically stronger Vitolins pins his opponent to the bed with a pillow and the loser begs for mercy. The demand of the winner: you will sing the national anthem of the Soviet Union in Russian.'

Vladimir Tukmakov calls the chess potential that Vitolins had 'fantastic': 'Because of his sharp, vivid, combinative style Vitolins was called the second Tal. For him chess was everything, which also made him similar to Tal. He was uncommunicative, as though all wrapped up in himself. Although I played him several times, I doubt whether we exchanged more than a sentence or two after a game. The great hopes expected of him were not realised. It became clear that he would not become a great player, and this happened before he was thirty – he quickly burned out. Of course, even after this everyone knew that Vitolins was very dangerous, and that you could not relax against him, but his time had already passed...'

Indeed, Vitolins' entire biography can be summed up in a few lines. Initially, there were enormous hopes and successes in junior competitions. Successes, which somehow came to nothing. He did not even become a grandmaster, and the number of international tournaments that he played, all within the Soviet Union, can be counted on the fingers of one hand. In Latvia, however, Alvis shone. Seven times he won the Championship of the Republic and several times he won Baltic tournaments. And that, really, is all. In the late 80s and early 90s, when it finally became possible to travel abroad, he played in some open tournaments in Germany, but he was already in his forties and his best years were obviously behind him. He completed two courses at the German Department of the University Philological Faculty in Riga and he spoke German quite well. All his life Vitolins lived with his parents and he was never married. These are the external contours of his biography. The fact is that he had no other life apart from that associated with games, tournaments, and endless analyses.

How did he play? Vitolins' motto was the initiative. The initiative at any price. The creation of positions where two pawns, or even one pawn, for a piece are sufficient compensation, because the pieces remaining on the board develop a furious energy. This becomes the decisive factor in the

evaluation of the position, more even than the vulnerability of the enemy king. Very often after such a sacrifice, amazing things would happen: the positional advantage would inexorably increase, the opponent's superior forces would lose their coordination, and the attack would strengthen with every move. It stands to reason that the king remained his target, but the main aim was nevertheless to extract the maximum energy from the pieces. Such a manner of play is altogether typical of the Latvian school of chess. Obvious in Tal and Vitolins, it can be observed today in Shirov, Shabalov and Lanka. A distinguishing feature of this style is the creation of positions where both kings are under threat, everything is hanging, and from one incorrect move the entire construction can collapse. It is for good reason that Shirov's book is entitled *Fire on Board*.

Like Shirov, Vitolins possessed good endgame technique, but he played hardly any lengthy, manoeuvring games. If in Napoleon's definition of war as 'a simple art, consisting entirely in action', we replace war with chess, we come close to Vitolins' perception of the game.

In the chess world people knew that if Alvis obtained his kind of position, he could win against anyone. But however striking Vitolins was as a player, in the first instance he was a tireless researcher of chess. His motto was 1.e2-e4! and wins! He followed the line of Vsevolod Rauzer, that remarkable researcher, with whose name is associated the development of many attacking systems in the theory of the game. Or, perhaps, the roots are even deeper, in the convictions of Philidor, who asserted that the player beginning the game should win with correct play. In all the openings he analysed for White, Vitolins tried to demonstrate not only an advantage, but a big advantage, if possible a decisive one.

In the words of Vladimir Bagirov: 'Starting in 1980, when I began holding training sessions with the Latvian team, Alvis came to me every Friday. Our lessons consisted in us playing blitz, five-minute. The winner was the first who gained ten points. Vitolins played every game as if it were the game of his life and he suffered terribly when he lost. He was a brilliant blitz player, in some way not inferior even to Tal. I sometimes beat him, but he won more often and by a bigger margin. In all the games where I was Black, we played the Alekhine Defence or the Caro-Kann. He prepared for these matches thoroughly and he developed his own ideas, trying to obtain a big advantage in the Caro-Kann, and altogether to refute the Alekhine Defence, which he did not consider a serious opening. The storming continuation on the 6th move, which he employed most often

and subsequently introduced into tournament play, I called the Vitolins Variation in my book.'

Vitolins developed and created the modern theory of the Cochrane Gambit in the Petroff Defence and played dozens of games with this variation. 'Will you sacrifice on f7 if I play the Petroff?' Vitolins was asked by one of the participants in the 1985 Latvian Championship, who had prepared what he considered to be an improvement. 'Of course', came the confident reply. He won in a swift, crushing attack.

However, the main testing ground of his searchings was the Sicilian Defence, where he was a veritable generator of ideas. The favourite squares for his bishops in this opening were b5 and g5. Very often he dropped the bishop on b5 even if this square was controlled by a pawn on a6. He would develop his position in a fan-shape, often directing his knights to the squares d5, f5 and e6, where they were under attack of the enemy pawns.

He was responsible for numerous discoveries in the Poisoned Pawn Variation, which was very popular in the 60s and 70s and which was regularly employed by Fischer. Essentially, the entire theory of the major branch of this variation, involving a knight sacrifice on the 18th move and an attack with subsequent quiet moves, began with Vitolins. About another branch of the same variation, which he introduced into tournament play, he wrote an article for *New In Chess*, concluding it with the characteristic words: 'My experience as a chess analyst tells me that any, even the most thorough, analysis may have certain flaws. I just want to point out to the reader that even in a seemingly worn-out variation completely new ideas can be found. Truly chess has no limits!'

Vitolins was also responsible for several of the most aggressive continuations against the Polugaevsky Variation. Tal, who on many occasions made use of Alvis's help and advice, successfully employed these ideas in a match against the author of the variation himself, although he did not succeed in realising them to the end. However, another idea of Vitolins in the Rauzer Variation (again the bold development of the bishop at b5!) brought Tal some important points, first in the Interzonal Tournament, and then in the Candidates Tournament in a game against Kortchnoi in Montpellier 1985. Misha, in general, regarded Vitolins very touchingly, seeing in him an unfulfilled genius, which, of course, he was. He always spoke of him as a like thinker and successor. Vitolins was responsible for the idea of the pawn sacrifice b7-b5 in the 4.Qc2 variation of the Nimzo-Indian Defence, and the variation with Bb4+ followed by c7-c5

in the Bogó-Indian Defence was one that he first began to develop. At first sight the latter idea looks absurd: a pawn, with which the centre could have been attacked, voluntarily moves to the flank. On the other hand, tension is created on that part of the board, and, most important, an unusual position is reached where his rich imagination could display itself.

In the old days there was a simple attitude to the problem of improvement in chess. 'There are no particular subtleties in this game. If you are not aiming to become a professional player, you should only play as often as possible', wrote Schiffers in the *Shakhmatny Zhurnal* in 1894. However, in modern chess systematic training, the study of special literature and analysis became essential for raising the standard of play, although in chess genuine diligence consists not so much in working zealously as in working correctly. A truth, which is often forgotten by amateurs, trying to make progress in the game and not sparing time on improvement.

But what is meant by chess analysis, and how did Vitolins analyse? It is obvious that he was constantly in a state that is well known to anyone who has seriously studied chess. After several hours of evening analysis a position appears to be resolved, but a final verdict has not yet been reached at. It is somewhere close, but it slips away elusively. Night comes, you feel tired, and you realise that it would be best to put things off until tomorrow, but in desperation you continue seeking this tempo, and you check all the moves, approaching the start of the variation, and sometimes even the initial placing of the pieces. But if the truth dawns and the solution is finally found, you know that the joy of discovery will outweigh the fatigue of all the days, weeks and even months spent searching for that which you intuitively sensed from the very start. In his case, time played altogether no role and the reward was not prizes, money or rating points, but the process itself of immersion in chess.

Chess theory is like a snake, which grows and sheds its skin. A continuous renewal is taking place. But in contrast to a snake, in the theory of chess there is an ongoing process of returning to old variations that have gone out of fashion. They appear enriched with new ideas. Many notches on this line of research were made by Alvis Vitolins. His ideas left their mark, even if much of what he analysed or played now seems naïve or, after testing by time and computer, not altogether correct.

He was overflowing with ideas, and when playing he was not always able to make a realistic evaluation of the situation on the board. This along

with his open dislike for defence and play in slightly inferior positions, was his obvious weakness. Lev Alburt and Yury Razuvaev, who played Vitolins many times, recall how they tried to play against him in classical style, with exaggerated strictness, knowing that at some point Alvis might be carried away by some spectacular move, or some brilliant, tempting, but not altogether correct combination, and would let the game slip out of control.

However, to understand fully the phenomenon of Alvis Vitolins, one has to know that he suffered from a severe mental derangement. Effectively from the very start, he was not so much battling against his opponent as against himself.

Zigurds Lanka knew Vitolins from the mid-70s, when he himself began playing regularly in the Latvian Championships: 'Alvis' junior trainer Tsirtsenis thought that already towards the end of his school days he was beginning to display symptoms of schizophrenia. This illness pursued Vitolins throughout his life. All the time he had to take strong drugs, which dulled his perception and made him play worse. He used to avoid taking them, in order to retain clarity of thought and reaction, but this led to breakdowns. At the board this displayed itself when in a perfectly normal, perfectly defensible position he would simply resign, if it was not to his liking. In life, being a wilful and direct person, he could even knock somebody out.

'Not everyone was able to endure his daily regime. Since I was the youngest in the team, in all competitions outside Riga we were always put in the same hotel room. At night he would usually be awake, analysing some position on a magnetic chess set, dropping off to sleep only towards morning. He might not go to bed for two days, but then he would sleep for a whole twenty-four hours. He could almost always be found in the Riga Chess Club; he would be there for days on end. I played a mass of games with him, tournament games, with a shortened time control, or blitz. When playing Black I felt, as perhaps against no one else, that I was constantly under terrible pressure. Each move of his created some threat and carried a definite charge of energy; he would not allow me to play quietly. His play was a demonstration of colossal dynamics and excellent technique, based on classical, logical chess and good training.

'When I now see how Shirov analyses or when I play through the games of Anand and Kramnik, I am reminded of Alvis. Absolute penetration into the essence of the position and anticipation of events many moves ahead. This comes easily to very few.'

Tall, very big, with long side-whiskers, in his young years he resembled the famous American who was almost his namesake: Elvis. As he grew older his facial features became sharper, here and there deep lines appeared, his side-whiskers became even longer, and he came to look more like the skipper of an English cargo ship of the nineteenth century. And still in Vitolins' appearance one sensed something strange and languid. He was as though not of this world, with his inadequate, often unpredictable reactions and his strange laugh. In his youth this was not so marked, but with the years these features became ever more obvious. By nature he was honest, naïve and kind. The smile that sometimes stole over his face made him look child-like and defenceless – all his life Alvis essentially remained a big child. As often happens with this type of people, he was physically very strong. When the doctor advised him to take up some sport, he, an individualist by nature, acquired a seven-kilogram shot and every day threw it on his farmstead. He did this with passion, rejoicing over improvements in his results, and taking his personal record, so it is said, up to thirteen metres.

He did not have any close friends. He avoided people, especially strangers, and especially those who were not chess players. At tournaments he was often seen in the company of Karen Grigorian (1947-1989). Karen Grigorian's father was the outstanding Armenian poet Ashot Grashi and his mother was a professor of philology. Very intelligent and well-read, from childhood Karen could cite many poets from memory. His favourite image in literature was Lermontov's *Demon*, and, in painting, Vrubel's *Demon*. Karen grew up as a highly sensitive and vulnerable boy, with a subtle feeling for art. It is hard to say how his fate would have turned out, had he followed in the footsteps of his parents, but at the age of seven the boy became devoted to chess. He possessed a striking, versatile talent and was considered the chess hope of Armenia.

In the 70s Karen Grigorian regularly took part in the finals of the USSR Championship. Like Vitolins, he did not seem to belong to this world, perhaps not so morose as Alvis, but also strange, unusual, not like others.

It is curious that Karen studied for a time with Lev Aronin, an outstanding player and theoretician, who was also burdened with serious mental problems. One of the critical games in Aronin's chess career was his meeting with Smyslov in the 19th USSR Championship in 1951. It was adjourned in a position where practically any move would have led to a win for White. However, Aronin, who had a whole day for analysis, went into a pawn ending, which allowed his opponent a study-like way to save the

game. Karen later remembered that whenever he called in him, Aronin would be sitting at that position, pensively moving the pieces about.

One of Karen's favourite questions was: 'What do you think, which tournament was stronger, Nottingham 1936 or the 1973 USSR Championship?' Karen asked it regularly, grasping the other person by the elbow and looking him in the eye. In that tournament in 1973, one of the strongest in the entire history of USSR championships, he played splendidly. By present-day standards Karen was a strong grandmaster. After winning two successive games in a USSR Championship or an international tournament, he would consider himself a genius and would readily set up a link: 'Yesterday I won against Tal. Of course, Tal is no longer World Champion, but he has a positive score against Fischer. What do you think about my chances in a match with Fischer?' The following day, after losing a game, he could become dejected and depressed, repeating that his own play was repulsive to him, that his life was of no use to anyone. He would begin talking about suicide, long before he became a patient at a psychiatric hospital and long before that final free-fall jump from the highest bridge in Yerevan on 30th October 1989.

The friendship between Grigorian and Vitolins was not a friendship in the generally accepted sense of the word. Shut off from the other world, they simply understood each other, or, more correctly, trusted each other. They intuitively felt that the other was a kindred soul, who after a conversation with you does not go off and begins retelling its content with an ironic smile. And of course, in their world, chess, which they both loved selflessly, played the most important role.

Both Alvis Vitolins and Karen Grigorian were outstanding masters of blitz. While in tournament chess they were strong and dangerous, although uneven players, in lightning play they had few equals. This also applies to Lembit Oll (1966-1999), the Estonian grandmaster who possessed a rare memory and was a brilliant theoretician, a man of similar fate, who also suffered from a psychic disorder and in the same way voluntarily departed from this life. The explanation suggests itself. The time allotted for play in a classical game allows one to sink into thought, generating doubts and uncertainty. For them, with their sharp falls in mood and excitable nervous system, this served only as a stimulus for mistakes and oversights. Blitz, however, demands instant reactions, while psychology and self-reproach retreat into the background. Here, they obviously thrive on their great natural talent.

Any game of chess contains a wide range of emotions, with joys and vexations, great and small. These emotions accompany any type of creativity. But whereas in painting or literature it is possible to cross out, rewrite or change, in chess one movement of the fingers, communicated by the mind, is final. Often it can be repaired only by sweeping the wooden pieces off the board. Or you can castigate yourself, by hitting your head against a wall, or by rolling around on the floor, as one modern grandmaster does after losing a game.

It is a rare game that develops with the smooth accumulation of an advantage and its conversion into a point. But even in this case a player who is honest with himself knows what he was afraid of at a certain moment, what he was hoping for, and how he flinched after miscalculating a variation. Time and again, however, a game proceeds according to the following approximate pattern: slightly worse, clearly worse, a mistake by the opponent, joy, winning chances, time trouble, missed opportunities, draw. Such changes in mood and emotion occur both in professional and in amateur play, with the only difference that in the latter case these sharp peaks of ascents and descents can be seen several times.

A change of mood during the course of a tournament, although not in such an abrupt form as with Karen Grigorian, is also familiar to every player. 'Even the way you walk has changed', said the observant David Bronstein in January 1976 in Hastings after I had managed to win a couple of games in a row. This sort of emotional stress and sudden decline during a game or during a tournament, does not serve to strengthen the inner mental core. Chess at top level constantly shakes it, which can have far-reaching consequences, especially if this core is shaky or diseased. In no other type of sport does one encounter such a large number of peculiar people, engrossed in themselves and living in their own world. What attracts them, with their shaky, unstable psyche into this, by Nabokov's definition 'complex, delightful and useless art'? Or is it the other way round and is it chess that affects the psyche?

One does not have to turn to Vladimir Nabokov or Stephan Zweig. In the living gallery of chess of yesterday and today it is not difficult to find geniuses or unfulfilled geniuses among this type of people. 'Torre's first steps were those of a future world champion', wrote Emanuel Lasker at the start of the career of Carlos Torre (1905-1978), the highly talented Mexican player, who at a young age was forced to give up chess and to spend part of his life in a psychiatric clinic. Albin Planinc, who in his manner of play so resembled Tal, flashed across the chess firmament in the

late 60s and early 70s, and played brilliantly in tournaments. His career also did not last long: as a result of a severe psychic disorder he too had to give up chess and became a regular patient at a special clinic.

But what are the boundaries of common sense, reason, normality? Clear reference markers are lacking. Often it is a question of frontier regions, in the thickets of which even psychiatrists lose their way. Vladimir Nabokov, who by his own admission took particular pleasure in composing 'suicide studies' – where White forces Black to win – said in an interview on French television: 'Yes, Fischer is a strange person, but there is nothing abnormal about a chess player being abnormal, this is normal. Take the case of Rubinstein, a well-known player of the early part of the century, who each day was taken by ambulance from the lunatic asylum, where he stayed constantly, to a café where he played, and then was taken back to his gloomy little room. He did not like to look at his opponent, but an empty chair at the chess board irritated him even more. Therefore in front of him they placed a mirror, where he saw his reflection, and, perhaps, also the real Rubinstein.'

Even in the years of his triumphs the great Akiba liked to sit half turned at the chess board, as though keeping aloof from his opponent and playing only his own game. And is not the same aloofness from others and defence of his brittle ego to be heard in Rubinstein's words: 'Tomorrow I am playing against the black pieces', in reply to a question about the name of his opponent in the next round. His nurse, madame Rubin-Zimmer, remembered: 'He was an unusually calm and self-controlled person. He was easy to look after. Physically he was exceptionally strong and very healthy for his age. But from time to time he would behave strangely. For days on end he would not come out of the room for even a short walk. Or sometimes in the evening he would not want to go to bed. Then he would sit in the armchair next to the bed and meditate deeply about something or move the pieces on a pocket chess set.'

We do not know how the lessons went, when the young O'Kelly went to the clinic to visit the famous Maestro. What was Rubinstein thinking of when, in the very last period of his confinement, he would sit for a long time in front of a chess board, with the pieces set up in the initial position, sometimes making the move 1.c2-c4 and, taking the pawn back after half an hour's thought, again looking at the chess board? What solution to the secret of the initial position did he imagine that he saw?

It is hard to say how the life of a nervous and impressionable American youth would have turned out, had he, after shining at university, based it

in accordance with the inscription on his diploma: 'Paul Charles Morphy Esquire, has the right to practise as a lawyer over the entire territory of the United States.' The chess world would have lost one of its greatest geniuses, but, perhaps, he would not have spent the last twenty years of his life in a state of severe psychic disorder. The first world champion Wilhelm Steinitz, who also ended his life in a psychiatric clinic, wrote: 'Chess is not for the weak of spirit, it devours a person entirely. To get to the bottom of this game, he gives himself up into slavery.'

This voluntary, pleasant slavery went without saying for one of the most outstanding players of the last century. Robert Fischer expressed genuine surprise: 'What else is there?' in reply to a question by an interviewer, as to what he did apart from chess. A champion gave the following explanation for his victories at the chess board: 'I devote 98 per cent of my mental energy to chess. The others devote only 2 per cent.' To what use did he put the two per cent of mental energy, remaining after chess? From childhood Fischer knew that money is good, that it is even better when there is a lot, and if possible if this is expressed in figures with six noughts. But what to do with this money? With money in general? In the end, does it matter along the streets of which town – New York, Pasadena or Budapest – you wander, fearing the omnipresent journalists and photographers? After all, that other chess world, the only one, is always inside you, at any time of day and night and at any point on the earth.

Aristotle wrote: 'Of the winners at the Olympic Games, only two or three gained victories both as boys and as mature men. The premature strain of preparatory exercises so exhausts one's strength, that later, at a mature age, it is nearly always lacking.'

In our day top chess demands even more all-devouring preparation, complete concentration, and aloofness from everything else. In the future this tendency will only be intensified. Players will reach the summit and pass their peak well before thirty. Too much nervous energy will have been spent on preparation and struggle in the younger years.

Giving the joy of creativity, and sometimes prizes and money, chess at the very highest level demands a trifle in return – the soul.

In the very last period of his life Alvis Vitolins would still be in the club nearly every day, giving advice to anyone who asked him, playing blitz, and analysing often until deep into the night. Sometimes he would even spend the night there. He was still gripped by a frenzied passion for analysis that could last for long hours or days, not distinguishing yesterday

from the day before. For him chess was never amusing; his life in chess, outside of everyday concerns, was his real life. He lived in chess, in solitude, as in a voluntary ghetto, and he felt uncomfortable outside the gates of this ghetto in the other big world, which was unreal and often hostile for him.

In addition he had reached the age of fifty and at this stage of his life he must have felt that he was no longer needed by anyone. Material things became determining and this material world, which he had always regarded with fear, menacingly impended over him. Vitolins was discarded by the federation, where he had been working as a trainer, for the simple reason that his job ceased to exist. It was not a question, of course, of the pennies that Alvis received there – his connections with the world collapsed. He had always been indifferent to what he ate and what he was dressed in. While his parents were alive this was their concern. They died within the space of one week, and on New Year's Eve 1996 the psychiatrist Eglitis, also a chess player, who had been treating Vitolins for free, also died.

Ragged, unkempt and toothless, Alvis came to say goodbye, the day before carrying out his conscious decision, to those who still remembered him. Only the following day did they realise what kind of a goodbye it had been.

What did he think about on his last day? What is life for? What is the reason for this world? What is fate? What is chess? Did he say farewell to it, or, like Nabokov's hero did he feel that: '...the chess men were pitiless, they held and absorbed him. There was horror in this, but in this also was the sole harmony, for what else exists in the world but chess? Fog, the unknown, non-being...'

Did he remember the fatal jump of Karen Grigorian, who also rebelled against the conventional: *mors certa, hora certa sed ignota* (death is certain, its hour is inevitable, but unknown)? *Ignota*? Or did he subconsciously follow the advice of the ancients: 'The main thing is, remember that the door is open. Do not be cowardly, but, like children, when they do not like a game, they say: I won't play any more. So, you too, when to you something feels the same, say: I won't play any more – and go way, go away, and if you remain, don't complain.'

He had never complained about this life, but also he did not want to remain in it any longer.

Sigulda is one of the most beautiful places in Latvia. Mysterious sandy caves, the ruins of medieval fortresses and castles, an enormous park with

ancient oaks divided by the swift-flowing Gauja with its precipitous banks. It is also good here in winter, when all is snowy and the trees are covered in hoar-frost. When the only thing sparkling in the sun is the white-blue ice of the hardened river, and it beckons, beckons to you, and there only remains the last jump. Like Luzhin, who 'at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, ... saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him'.

On a frosty day, the 16th February 1997, Alvis Vitolins threw himself down onto this ice from the railway bridge spanning the Gauja river.



above: Alvis Vitolins.

below: Karen Grigorian playing Vasily Smyslov at the 1973 Soviet Championship with Polugaevsky looking on.





top: Vitolins in one of his many encounters with Latvian rival Janis Klovans.

bottom: Vitolins playing the Lars-Åke Schneider at Jurmala 1978.

looking on (l. to r.) Evgeny Ermenkov, Mark Taimanov and Anatoly Lutikov.



top left: Grigory Levenfish.

top right: Emanuel Lasker.

right: Pyotr Romanovsky,  
Grigory Levenfish and Ilya  
Rabinovich in the '30s.



# The Summing Up

Grigory Levenfish

In the chess history of the last century, with its wealth of events and personalities, his name can be found only in footnotes. Appreciated by rare connoisseurs, he stayed in the memory of only a few people, but not in the collective memory, and today his name is almost forgotten. He was never a world champion and he was never a contender for this title. Moreover, the number of international tournaments in which he took part can be counted literally on the fingers of one hand. But it is not always points and titles that are the criteria of strength and talent. Lasker and Capablanca considered him to be the strongest player in the Soviet Union after Botvinnik. When remembering him, Smyslov, Bronstein and Taimanov, Kortchnoi and Spassky use the epithets outstanding, remarkable and eminent. Even today, looking back at events of more than half a century ago, they, the champions and vice-champions of the world, the strongest players of their time, speak of him as someone from their ranks. An unusual individual, a highly erudite man, who stood out sharply against the grey background of the conforming masses. In piecing together memories of events and people of that era, one gains a different view of much that seems old-fashioned, insignificant, and is gone for ever.

Grigory Yakovlevich Levenfish was born on the 9th March 1889 into a Jewish family of modest means in Poland, which was then part of the Russian Empire. In Lublin he played his first games of chess. In 1907, after finishing secondary school, he went to St Petersburg, where he began studying at the prestigious Institute of Technology. It was in St Petersburg that Levenfish first performed successfully in a number of tournaments. In the 1910s to the 30s he was one of the strongest chess players in the country. He twice won the Championship of the Soviet Union, the ninth in 1934-35 and the tenth in 1937. By drawing a match that same year with Botvinnik, he upheld the title of champion, for which he was awarded the title of USSR grandmaster. From 1950 he was an international grandmaster. Levenfish died in 1961. This is how the outline of his biography looks.

He repeated on many occasions: 'I must talk about that which, apart from me, no one knows.' Not long before his death, he completed his memoirs. As an epigraph he chose the words of Somerset Maugham from his book *The Summing Up*:

‘In youth the years stretch before one so long that it is hard to realise that they will ever pass, and even in middle age, with the ordinary expectation of life in these days, it is easy to find excuses for delaying what one would like to do but does not want to; but at last a time comes when death must be considered. Here and there one’s contemporaries drop off. We know that all men are mortal... but it remains for us little more than a logical premise till we are forced to recognise that in the ordinary course of things our end can no longer be remote. ... I have long thought that it would exasperate me to die before I had written this book.’

The citation might have continued with Somerset Maugham’s conclusion:

‘When I have finished it I can face the future with serenity, for I shall have rounded off my life’s work.’

Levenfish did not include this last phrase in the epigraph, probably because he already knew that in his case it would not be so.

Not long before his death, at the editorial office of *Fizkultura i Sport*, he met Bronstein. ‘Do you know, Devik, what they have done to me?’ Levenfish was in a state of despair. ‘They have crossed out half of my book. All the sharpest and most interesting bits have been thrown out!’ Levenfish was not destined to see his book, even in this revised form: it was only published six years after his death. Bronstein’s subsequent attempts to trace the manuscript came to nothing – it had disappeared without a trace.

Levenfish wrote this book in the sunset of his life, at an age when one’s entire life seems one very short past, and the past an inseparable part of the present. Yet, is there anything more real than that which is carefully retained in the memory? Even in those comparatively liberal Khrushchev times he was unable to delve into his life with the openness, essential for those who have decided on the difficult and gloomy occupation of summing-up.

Let me make an attempt to do this anyway. There is something to start from – his book. There are still some people alive, although not many, who remember him. And there remain his games. Who plays through them can gain an impression of what sort of chess player was Grigory Yakovlevich Levenfish.

His student years coincided with the period which in Russia is customarily called the Silver Age. Without a doubt, for Levenfish those years were the best in his life. Not only because this was his youth, his student years, with an abundance of vital energy. They were full of all the concerts, exhibitions and performances that the avant-garde Russia of the start of the century had

to offer. He lived those years in a city which, as he himself said later, 'made a stunning impression on him, an inhabitant of the quiet provinces'. Here he continued to live almost his entire life. And here was chess.

The chess club in the St Petersburg Institute of Technology was considered one of the strongest in the city. One of its members was Vasily Osipovich Smyslov, the father of the future world champion and himself a strong player. In February 1909, at the Chigorin Memorial Tournament, the 20-year-old Levenfish followed with bated breath the games of Lasker, Schlechter, Rubinstein, Teichmann and Duras. That same year, for the first time in his life, he played a game with a clock. Levenfish's opponent in that game was a student at the Conservatory who was destined to have a brilliant future. His name was Sergey Prokofiev.

Levenfish improved considerably and at the tournament in Carlsbad in 1911 he became a master. It was in Carlsbad that he played the young Alexander Alekhine, who Levenfish already knew from St Petersburg. After finishing secondary school in Moscow, Alekhine had moved to St Petersburg and entered a privileged law school. In this period, right up to 1914, Levenfish was a constant partner of Alekhine. They played several tournament games and numerous friendlies.

'In my whole life I never met such an interesting opponent as Alekhine', Levenfish wrote. 'He played with great nervous intensity, smoking constantly, all the time pulling on a lock of his hair and fidgeting on his chair. This tension stimulated in amazing fashion the working of his brain. The wealth of ideas in Alekhine's play is well known. In friendly games I think that it displayed itself even more vividly. The advantage in our games was on the side of Alekhine. The slightest weakening of attention would result in a tactical invention by my opponent and the outcome would be settled. Alekhine had a phenomenal chess memory. He could restore in full a game that had been played many years earlier. But no less surprising was his absent-mindedness. Several times he left in the club a valuable cigarette-case with a clasp made out of a large emerald. Two days later we would arrive at the club and sit down at a chess board. A waiter would appear and, as if nothing had happened, present Alekhine with his cigarette-case. Alekhine would courteously thank him...'

The First World War began, then came the Revolution in Russia and the Civil War. Levenfish became a witness to events which determined the course of world history. In his memoirs he devotes only a few lines to these events, but they drew a line under the first period of his life: 'In the stormy years of the War and the Revolution I had to endure a great deal. I

worked in war factories and sometimes I was left totally without work. In 1917 my wife suddenly died. It was not possible even to think about chess.'

He was twenty-eight years old. The second period of his life began. In Somerset Maugham's book *The Summing Up* one can also read the following: '...we live in an era of rapid change and I may yet see the countries of the West given over to the rule of communism. If such a condition of things came to pass in my world I should make an attempt to adapt myself and then, if I found life intolerable, I think I should not lack the courage to quit a stage on which I could no longer play my part to my own satisfaction.' Fine words, of course. Other words, unsophisticated ones – 'I remained alive' – spoken in a distant, but no less stormy era, became the reference-point for Levenfish for many long years.

The future always looks like a choice of possibilities, because one has a choice. An absence of choice signifies predetermination and doom. In the Soviet Union freedom of choice was reduced not only in the sense of movement in space, but – more importantly – of will. The totalitarian state interfered in all aspects of the life of each of its members, subjecting them to its rules and laws. There was only one possibility of retaining your individuality, by what the French call 'rester soi-même'. But to remain yourself was not easy: to uphold your spiritual independence demands courage in any society and was required many times over in the system that was established in Russia.

Although formally he did not belong to the 'bourgeois', he effectively was one in the eyes of those who had now come to power. Alexander Blok wrote about those first years of the Soviet state: 'Anyone who had accumulated any valuables, even if only spiritual, was called bourgeois.'

The words of the state prosecutor Krylenko at one of the first trials in 1920 sounded like a sentence to his circle of people: 'There existed and continues to exist another stratum of society, the social existence of which has long been under consideration by the representatives of revolutionary socialism. This stratum is the so-called intelligentsia. ... In this trial we will be dealing with the justice of history over the activity of the Russian intelligentsia.'

Many of Levenfish's colleagues emigrated. The sweet happiness of freedom, and sometimes also the bitterness of emigration, was something that he never tasted. He remained. What would he have done if he had left the country? Played chess, like Alekhine and Bogoljubow? Combined playing with journalism and the writing of books, as did Tartakower and Znosko-

Borovsky? Or would he have played in tournaments from time to time while having a regular job, as did Osip Bernstein, who made his living as a lawyer?

In February 1924 former World Champion Emanuel Lasker paid a visit to Soviet Russia. In Leningrad he played a number of exhibition games and gave two simultaneous displays. During one of them, one could notice in the hall a boy who only a few months earlier had learned to play chess. He was twelve years old and his name was Misha Botvinnik. Lasker's opponent in one of the exhibition games was Levenfish, whom Lasker remembered from earlier visits to St Petersburg. Levenfish spoke excellent German and they spent a considerable amount of time together. The following year they met again in the first international tournament in Moscow. Deep in the endgame Lasker went wrong, losing an important tempo, and Levenfish won.

Not long before this tournament Levenfish received a letter from Alekhine, who had emigrated in 1921 and for several years had been living in France. It began as follows: 'Dear Grigory Yakovlevich! I was very pleased to receive your letter and I too am sorry that I will not be seeing you at the Moscow international tournament. However, perhaps you are intending to play in some international tournament abroad in the coming year! I am in no doubt that, given notification in good time, your participation will be assured in any international tournament, firstly, because you personally are liked and appreciated, and secondly, because at the present moment Russian chess is rated extremely highly in the international market. Then, I hope, after this long break we will be able to meet.' They did not manage to meet. Alekhine was prohibited from entering Soviet Russia and Levenfish never played in any tournament outside it.

A chess fever began to grip the country. In the young country of the Soviets, the energy of the masses was directed, among other things, into chess. During this period, Alexander Alekhine, who many times juggled with his political leanings, was asked by a journalist 'How can the unprecedented interest in chess in the Soviet Republic be explained?' He replied: 'But what else is there for them to do?'

In Leningrad in the 20s and 30s there were three masters from the old pre-revolutionary ranks who determined the chess life of the city: Romanovsky, Ilya Rabinovich and Levenfish. Levenfish was superior in strength to the other two and enjoyed enormous authority. Romanovsky's book *Puti shakmatnogo tvorchestva* was dedicated to Levenfish and, as the author admit-

ted, was largely inspired by him. Levenfish could play badly in a tournament, but his enormous erudition and subtle understanding of the game were widely known. Tolush once said to the Leningrad master Dmitry Rovner: 'Levenfish can play any old how, but all the same he understands chess better than all of us.'

All his life Vladimir Zak remembered his first meeting with Levenfish, and he often talked about it. In the club of Soviet Trade Workers, Pyotr Arsenevich Romanovsky took the timid lad up to the board where Levenfish was playing blitz: 'Grigory Yakovlevich, this is Volodya Zak.'

'Yes, yes', replied Levenfish, not tearing himself away from the game.

'Volodya shows great promise.'

'I know, I know', continued the maestro, making a move. 'Volodya Zak, the son of old Mr Zak...'

In 1926, in a Trades Union team competition in Leningrad, Levenfish played a game with a shy, thin youth, with a serious appearance, way beyond his years, from under his round, horn-rimmed glasses. Misha Botvinnik was fifteen years old, but he already had a first category rating, which was no mean achievement in those times. In addition the previous year he had crushed the great Capablanca in a simultaneous display. The game did not last long. Levenfish as Black played the opening not at all according to theory, developed his knight via h6 to f5 and struck a blow against d4. By the 16th move it was all over. The result of this game did not surprise anyone. A recognised master had defeated a young player who was just beginning his chess career. Botvinnik did not forget this game. He was not one to forget anything. Levenfish could not imagine then that, within five years, this boy would become champion of the Soviet Union and that the rest of his life would be marked by a confrontation with him.

Among the various shades of attitudes of Jews to their nationality, Grigory Yakovlevich Levenfish adopted a position very similar to that of his contemporary Boris Pasternak. A baptised Jew and a native of St Petersburg in spirit, Levenfish was indifferent both to questions of religion and to questions of nationality. He became assimilated completely in the Russian language, culture and mode of life.

Tall, imposing, bespectacled, reserved, watchful and unapproachable in appearance, sarcastic and even acrimonious with almost everyone, Grigory Yakovlevich Levenfish was in fact a jovial and witty person. For those few who knew him intimately and were close to him, he was sympathetic and gentle. In an old-fashioned way he was courteous and gallant with women,

to whose smiles he was not indifferent all his life. A music lover and a friend of musicians, he was highly emotional and excitable. He could often be seen at the card table.

Leonid Finkelstein, writer and journalist, remembers: 'Levenfish used to come to our place in the evening, handsome, smelling of eau-de-Cologne and impeccably dressed. I watched him with admiration and once even, plucking up courage, suggested that we play a game of chess. He declined my offer courteously, but decisively. Still, I supported him in his match against Ilya Rabinovich. Before sitting down to play he would usually drink a glass of vodka and eat a salmon sandwich. My father was a professor of mathematics and his colleagues were Grigory Yakovlevich's partners at cards – preference or whist. I used to sleep there, of course, in the same room of a normal Leningrad communal flat. The bright light did not keep me from sleeping and I would not wake up when they departed deep into the night, or sometimes even towards morning.'

In contrast to another representative of his generation, Savielly Tartakower, who spent a considerable amount of time in the casino, Levenfish was attracted to cards not only by the element of mental battle and gambling. For him and for people of his generation and representatives of the same cultural environment, gathering at the card table was one of the few opportunities to escape from the gloom of everyday life into a world of their own. An escape into a world, which was not accessible by the totalitarian state, which had not yet learned how to control thought.

What happened to them was a kind of anabiosis, a state of suspended animation, such as occurs with fish in winter. Endeavouring not to think about what was happening around them, they spoke in card terminology or about trifling things, burying inside themselves something quite different. In order to survive, they either had to conform, or to mimic, and there were no ready-made prescriptions for how to live a worthy life in those blood-thirsty times. Conforming signified the loss of your soul, while mimicry led to an adoption of the traits, large and small, and habits and customs of your surroundings. Perhaps this was why, when I came across people of this type in the Soviet Union in the 60s, they did not appear to me to be from another planet. They looked quite normal, apart from sprinklings of something, on which one's gaze and hearing, accustomed to greyness and monotony, would involuntarily halt.

During the Moscow international tournaments Levenfish was seen playing tennis with Capablanca on more than one occasion. Tall and elegant in his

white tennis outfit, he appeared on court at a time when this sport was elitist, especially in the Soviet Union. The Soviets preferred parades by thousands of gymnasts, air displays in Tushino, mass runs, fitness exercises in the Parks of Culture and Rest, or football matches between Dinamo and the Central Army Team.

He also had a liking for wine. But not in the global, self-destructive sense which was typical, for example, of Alekhine. His attitude was that of a connoisseur or gourmet. In the preparations for the match with Botvinnik in 1937, the Moscow master Sergey Belavenets took part. They stayed on the Black Sea, in the Crimea, in Koktebela. Levenfish later recalled: 'We settled on the beach and got down to analysis. In the breaks we plunged into the waves. In such an atmosphere there could be no question of 'dry analysis'.'

In the period from 1926 to 1933 Levenfish hardly played any chess. He tried to combine occasional play in tournaments with a regular job. This was a logical decision that dated back to December 1913, when Levenfish, taking part in a master tournament, a qualifying event for the grand St Petersburg tournament of 1914, was preparing at night the defence of his diploma project at the institute.

He was a chemist, a specialist in glass, and he worked in his speciality, while in chess he remained an amateur. This word, which initially had only one meaning – 'one who likes' – gradually acquired a negative shade of meaning, especially to the ears of chess professionals. In the early 30s, the young Soviet players, who were devoting the greater part of their time to chess, regarded Levenfish in roughly the same way as Western professionals regarded Euwe, who, on becoming world champion, did not give up working as a mathematics teacher at a girls' school in Amsterdam. Later Levenfish himself was to say: 'Given the modern level of chess development, it is possible to maintain one's technique at the required high level only under one condition: by engaging only in chess. A fall in standard is inevitable given a lack of practice. It cannot be compensated by analytical work at home.' Even so, for a long time he did not want to go over to chess, but tried to combine play with his main work. He did not want to leave the circle of professors and teachers among the St Petersburg intelligentsia, which had developed in the city in the first decade of Soviet power. His circle of people who, like him, had tried to remain on a small island of Russian culture, which was now eroded and dying.

But this was not the main thing. While loving chess and largely living in it, he did not want to devote his life exclusively to the game, thinking that such a decision was correct only for the giants of chess. This conviction stemmed from the 19th century, when chess was more of a relaxation, an intellectual amusement, alongside one's main, serious occupation, and could not and should not be a profession. Lasker wrote: 'Of course, chess, despite its subtle and deep content, is only a game, and cannot command as serious an attitude as science and technology, which serve the vital needs of society. Still less can it be compared with philosophy and art.' Not long before his death, Chigorin said to his loved ones: 'What in general is the point of chess? If it is a pleasure, then it should take place as a relaxation, after working hours. After all, you cannot occupy your life with your interest in a game, banishing everything else. Look at the foreigners: this one is a doctor, this one a professor, this one a publisher... They work and they play a little. And I?'

Such an attitude was also typical of many other forms of creative activity. 'For me music is relaxation, fun, whim, diverting me from my real work – professorship, lectures', wrote Alexander Borodin, also a chemist by profession.

Levenfish did not give up his profession out of free will. It was virtually forced. A rail crash caused by a non-functioning signal was regarded as an act of sabotage. Levenfish was arrested the same day and released only after being interrogated for several hours by the secret service. A report submitted a few months before the accident about a change in the technological process of glass production saved him from prison, but for how long? The very word 'specialist' had become almost synonymous with traitor. Newspapers of the time were full of reports about trials of 'saboteurs' and 'wreckers'. At the conclusion of a trial in 1930 of the so-called 'Industrial party', whose leaders were accused of receiving secret instructions from Poincaré and Lawrence of Arabia with the aim of breaking the industrial might of the country of Soviets and of preparing the ground for foreign aggression against the young Soviet state, the prosecutor Nikolay Krylenko said: 'I am firmly convinced that a small anti-Soviet stratum still remains in engineering circles. In the epoch of the dictatorship of the proletariat and surrounded on all sides by enemies, we have sometimes displayed unnecessary softness, unnecessary soft-heartedness.'

Levenfish drew his conclusions and took his decision. He would go over completely to chess. His career as a professional chess player began.

The chess culture in which he found himself was very different from the chess he had played in St Petersburg in 1909 or in Carlsbad in 1911. The friends and chess colleagues of his youth had been: Baron von Freyman, a master since 1911, a participant and prize-winner in many tournaments, who after the Revolution ended up in Central Asia; Baron Rausch von Taubenberg, one of the strongest players at the University, who for a long time managed to stay afloat in Soviet Russia, but finally finished up in the Karagandinsky Camp; Professor Boris Mikhailovich Koyalovich, who had set Levenfish a maths exam when he was a student; Pyotr Potyomkin, poet and chess player, who emigrated after the Revolution – a club named after him still exists in Paris, and it was to Potyomkin that the International Chess Federation was indebted for its slogan 'Gens Una Sumus'; Sergey Prokofiev, who loved chess passionately; Fedor Bogatyrychuk from Kiev, who frequently made the journey to St Petersburg and subsequently became one of the strongest players in the Soviet Union. After the Second World War he settled in Canada.

Now, however a new generation had emerged, genetically linked with Soviet power. Its acknowledged leader Mikhail Botvinnik, the champion of the country, wrote at that time: 'The task that Krylenko set Soviet players in the 20s has been successfully accomplished. A young generation of Soviet masters has grown up.' In the eyes of this generation, Levenfish was an old man. It need hardly be said that his tennis, his knowledge of foreign languages, his manner of dressing and speaking, and his entire appearance merely emphasised the difference between him and this new generation. Everyone now had higher education. It stands to reason that this education bore no comparison with that in pre-Revolutionary times, to say nothing of the general cultural level. After all, it is well known that no higher education can replace primary education. With the former they tried to hide the defects of the latter in the young Soviet Republic. The poverty of average taste may be worse than the poverty of lack of taste – Doctor Zhivago reflected on this, and Levenfish too had something to compare.

Of course, always, in all times, the young generation has thought that for those leaving the stage the game is over. They may respect you, but you are no longer one of their number and in the end they always prefer the company of people of their own age. In the case of Levenfish, to the natural process of the change of generations was added a clear political shading. In the eyes of the young Komsomol members, and especially the directors of state chess in the republic of the Soviets, Levenfish was one of the 'has-beens', who belonged to that distant Russia that had departed for ever.

He was at best a 'fellow-traveller', but always, even when he had acquired some of the outward features of Soviet civilisation, he remained 'not one of us'. Now the time had come for those who were striving to catch and overtake the chess players of the bourgeois, capitalist countries, to the sounds of the summoning song:

*Ever higher, higher and higher  
We aim the flight of our planes,  
And in every propeller breathes  
The peace of our borders.*

Young and energetic, they went further, deeper and wider. They knew no doubts and in this movement forward they were supported by the young and amazing state, which, it seemed, was being built to last for ages.

*There are no obstacles to us either at sea or on land,  
We are not afraid of ice or clouds.  
The ardour of our soul, the banner of our country  
We will carry through worlds and ages.*

The magazine *Shakhmaty v SSSR* wrote in 1936: 'The Soviet chess style, as is already known, is distinguished by its aggressiveness. In general, is it not the struggle which in particular is typical of the Soviet style? The Soviet style is the Stakhanovite movement. And the Stakhanovite movement is struggle and victory. Stalin demands victories! And the Stakhanovites struggle and win. They win, because they possess technology. Technology is their weapon. Also in chess the theory of the game, all knowledge and principles constitute the instruments of struggle. Chess theory, chess analyses and commentaries, chess composition – all this plays an auxiliary and subordinate role with respect to the main thing in chess – the chess game, which is nothing other than a struggle.'

Bombastic phraseology with obvious hints of aggression was also always present in the speeches of Nikolai Krylenko: 'We must once and for all put an end to the neutrality of chess. We must once and for all condemn the formula 'Chess for the sake of chess' or 'Art for art's sake'. We must organise shock brigades of chess players and immediately begin fulfilling the five-year plan with regard to chess', he proclaimed.

Krylenko was an odious character, a doctrinaire and fanatic, who passionately loved chess and mountaineering. Back in 1917 he completed two

courses – at the Faculty of History and Philology at St Petersburg University, and at the Law Faculty in Kharkov. By a decision of Lenin, the 32-year-old warrant officer Krylenko was appointed Supreme Commander and Peoples Commissar for War. In the period from 1924 until his arrest in 1938 he stood at the head of Soviet chess, which was greatly indebted to him. ‘The Supreme Commander of the Soviet Chess School’ was what Botvinnik called him. In 1927, in one of the issues of the magazine 64, an appeal was published for contributions to the construction of an aeroplane named ‘The chess player’s plane, named after N.V.Krylenko’.

In 1936, during the Third Moscow International Tournament, he wrote: ‘Let it be known by the bourgeoisie of the entire world and all its hangers-on inside and outside our country: we will not hesitate to mercilessly crush the writhing serpent of counter-revolution and to wipe from the face of the earth anyone who dares to stand in the way of our planned socialist construction.’

Krylenko was put to death during the Great Terror, but before that he himself had sent thousands of innocent people to the gallows. ‘A shaved head with sharp facial features, penetrating eyes, free, careless speech with an aristocratic way of pronouncing his ‘r’s’, invariably dressed in service jacket and leggings – this was the outward appearance of one of Lenin’s popular comrades-in-arms. Kind, fair, principled, and he loved chess madly.’ This was how Krylenko was remembered by Botvinnik.

But not by everyone. In 1918 he made the impression on Bruce Lockhart, the later British Deputy Home Secretary, of being a ‘degenerate epileptic’. Ivanov-Razumnik, who shared a prison cell with Krylenko in 1938, called him ‘the People’s Commissar of Justice, notorious and despised by everyone’, and pointed out that the place allotted to him was appropriate: under the communal plank bed.

Chess reached its ideological peak in 1936, when *Pravda* devoted a leading article to Botvinnik’s victory in Nottingham. The paper wrote: ‘The unity of feelings and will of the entire country, the enormous concern of the people of Soviet power, the Communist Party and in particular comrade Stalin – these are the origins of the victories of the Soviet country, whether this be in the conquering of the air, in the sports arenas of Czechoslovakia, or at the chess boards in Nottingham. Sitting down at the chess board in Nottingham, Botvinnik could not help feeling that every move of the wooden pieces on his board was being followed by the entire country, and that the entire country, from the very corners to the Kremlin

towers, was wishing him success and morally supporting him. He could not but sense this powerful breath of his great motherland.'

In 1936 the USSR Constitution was adopted. That same year the Writers' Union proposed the following division of poets: firstly, Soviet only by passport, but not in spirit. Among those to be assigned to this category was Mandelstam. Secondly, 'visitors' to the epoch, to which Pasternak was assigned. And finally, genuine Soviet poets. If one draws an analogy with chess, Levenfish would have been in the first category, or at best in the second, whereas Botvinnik was undoubtedly the pride of the third.

'At the age of nine I began reading newspapers and became a convinced communist. It was hard to become a member of the Komsomol, as hardly any schoolchildren were accepted. For a long time I tried to achieve this (my brother was already a member) and finally in December 1926 I became a candidate Komsomol member', Botvinnik wrote in his memoirs.

'In this match Botvinnik displayed the qualities of a true Bolshevik.' These words of Krylenko, said after the Botvinnik-Flohr match in 1933, would for ever remain for him the highest praise.

Botvinnik questioned the scale and horror of the Terror and was proud of Stalin's words: 'Well done, lads', when the USSR beat the Americans in the famous radio match in 1945. He spoke with piety about the powers that be, who in reality were petty and often repulsive.

'Chess is in no way inferior to the violin', Botvinnik asserted on more than one occasion and therefore a game of chess demands absolute silence. Ideal conditions were achieved in the Hall of Columns in the House of Soviets in Moscow in 1941 during the match-tournament for the title of absolute USSR champion. In the words of Botvinnik: 'A law-enforcer in militia uniform walked up and down the central aisle. On one occasion an undisciplined spectator was evicted and fined.'

'I do not think that Levenfish was anti-Soviet', said Botvinnik in the early 90s, when I spoke to him about events of more than half a century earlier. Although the Soviet Union no longer existed, he pronounced the word 'anti-Soviet' such that it evoked the cold 58th article of the criminal code. The words 'true Leninist', 'old Bolshevik' and 'Soviet' were uttered by him proudly and triumphantly, although by then they had long since become outdated and left a rancid after-taste, which could not be stifled by anything.

However, despite the orthodoxy of his thinking and the categorical nature of his opinions, in close circles he liked to cite the formula of

Pushkin's Savelych, who, as is known, advised kissing the hand of a villain, and then spitting.

But there is no doubting his sincerity when he describes the finish to the second Moscow tournament of 1935: 'Finally came the last round. Flohr and I were level. I had to play Black against Rabinovich, and Flohr against Alatorsev. There was a knock on the door and in came Nikolai Vasilyevich Krylenko: 'What would you say', he asked me, 'if Rabinovich were to lose to you?' 'If I realise that I am being presented with the point, I myself will leave a piece en prise and promptly resign the game.' Krylenko looked at me in an obviously friendly way: 'Well, what should we do?' 'I think that Flohr himself will suggest that both games end in a draw; after all, he did something similar during our match.' Both games ended in draws, and Botvinnik and Flohr shared first place.

In the introduction to the book of this tournament, Krylenko was to write: 'In the form of M.M. Botvinnik the USSR defeated bourgeois chess culture, because his only rival, Flohr, who finished equal first with him, effectively did not win this first place, but received it in the form of an unusual present from the Soviet masters Kan and Bogatyrchuk, who defeated Botvinnik, thus allowing Flohr to finish equal with his rival. These defeats suffered by Botvinnik are also noteworthy, in that they display another quality that is peculiar to our chess players – their competitive honesty, which does not allow them to distort by one iota their heart for the struggle, even on the grounds of the false concept of patriotism.'

'He was always like a lone wolf', said Botvinnik in reply to my questioning about Levenfish, but when I tried to suggest something about a wolf who was persecuted and was not allowed out of an enclosure, he would reply that he was not sure that it was important and would disapprovingly shake his head.

'In the end he did not live so badly in the Soviet Union', he asserted, and looked at me through the thick glass of his spectacles. This look signified: he survived, he was not repressed, he was a well-known person in the country, he did not live in poverty in the direct sense of the word, and as regards the rest – well, what do you expect? It was that sort of time. And in his way he was right.

'It did not and could not happen that pressure was put on Levenfish to lose the game to me', Botvinnik replied angrily, when I asked him about the last round of the Moscow International Tournament of 1936. Capablanca, whose opponent was Eliskases, was half a point ahead of Botvinnik,

but the latter had to play Levenfish. 'Your position is difficult. All Botvinnik's supporters are eager for you to lose', said Capablanca to Levenfish during a stroll in the garden by the Kremlin wall. 'Don't worry, I will rescue you and win against Eliskases.' He did indeed win against Eliskases, while Levenfish's game with Botvinnik ended in a draw. Describing this episode in his memoirs, Botvinnik, with barely concealed irritation, writes: 'Levenfish permitted himself to start the rumour that he was being forced to lose in the last round.' But, the more angry he grew and the more he said 'It did not happen', the more obvious it became that it really did happen, it did.

On many pages of Botvinnik's books one finds situations where it is suggested that the outcome of a game was not decided at the chess board, because the prestige of Soviet chess, and hence of the entire Soviet state was at stake. Before the start of the Moscow part of the 1948 match-tournament for the world championship, Botvinnik was summoned to a meeting of the Party's Central Committee Secretariat. It was chaired by Zhdanov – one of the persons closest to Stalin. In the last edition of his book Botvinnik describes it as follows: 'But even so, we are afraid that Reshevsky will become world champion', said Zhdanov. 'How would you regard it if the Soviet participants were to lose to you deliberately?' I lost the power of speech. Why did Zhdanov want to humiliate me? During the previous few years I had played in seven tournaments and in all of them I had finished first, demonstrating a clear superiority over my rivals. On again acquiring the power of speech, I refused point-blank. But Zhdanov continued to insist, and I to refuse. The conversation reached an impasse. In order to conclude the argument, I offered a compromise: 'Very well, let's leave the question open. Perhaps it won't be needed?' Zhdanov was clearly pleased with the possibility of such a decision. 'Agreed', said Zhdanov, 'We are behind YOU' – he emphasised this word – 'we wish you victory.'

Botvinnik is sincere and absolutely convinced that he is right, when he repeatedly talks about his letters, telephone calls and appeals to people, the names of whom were known to everyone in the Soviet Union and the opinions of whom were above any laws. On the other hand, the telephone call of a Party bigwig with the aim of postponing the start of the 1961 return match on account of Tal's illness provokes an angry reaction in him: 'This interference in chess by the powers that be outraged me, and I lost

my self-control.' It need hardly be said that the return match began exactly on time.

Any discussion about those times was ruled out. I ran into a wall; his opinion, formed once and for all, remained unshakeable. If I insisted, or employed what seemed to me to be strong arguments, the conversation ended with a reaction, similar to that of Stalin during his famous telephone conversation with Pasternak, when in reply to the poet's suggestion that they meet and talk about life and death, the dictator simply hung up.

In August 1991 in Brussels, after concluding an interview a journalist asked him: 'It is understandable that you cannot now contend for the world championship, but why don't you sometimes play blitz or play chess just like that, for pleasure?'

'Young man', replied Botvinnik, not looking at him. 'Remember this: I never played chess for pleasure.' He always, even in his youth, strongly disapproved of blitz, of throwing the pieces around the board, of flippancy. Botvinnik did not play for pleasure, but was following his predestination, considering that he was fulfilling his life's work, work which had been entrusted to him by his motherland.

Botvinnik's book of memoirs is called *Achieving the Aim*. In his life there was one aim: to win the title of world champion for his country. He proceeded towards the title, sweeping away all barriers, not pondering over its meaning.

Nadezhda Mandelstam: 'Aim and meaning are not the same thing, but in youth the problem of meaning is only accessible to a few. It is perceived only on personal experience, becoming closely interwoven with the question of purpose, and therefore it is more often pondered over in old age, but by no means by all, but only those who are prepared for death and look back on the life they have led. The majority do not do this.'

*Achieving the Aim* was initially called *Only the Truth*. Events and facts, allowed through the prism of his Botvinnik's 'I', seemed to him to be the only correct ones. Rousseau's words: 'Perhaps it has happened that I have passed off as the truth what seemed to me to be the truth, but I have never passed off as the truth something that I knew to be false', would have seemed too mild to him. On the other hand the words of Marco Polo: 'All that I have said about the salamander is the truth, and anything else that is said is lies and fabrication', could have been a worthy epigraph of his book.

At the same time he was warm and compassionate to those whom he considered his friends, fastidious, but protective and considerate where his pupils were concerned, courteous and polite in everyday life. Those who knew this side of his personality strongly stood up for their Botvinnik.

From time to time he would quote the Russian classics, which he remembered from his schooldays. His humour was childishly simple ('How did you sleep, Mikhail Moiseevich?' 'Very vell, very vell...'). He dressed modestly, he was tidy, and in everyday life he was unpretentious to the point of asceticism. 'Gennady Borisovich, how old do you think these slippers are?' They looked as though they had been bought in Groningen in 1946. As it turned out this was not far from the truth.

His pride in his Soviet motherland was combined with a boundless respect for items acquired abroad. Before the tournament in Nottingham in 1936, Botvinnik and his wife spent a few days in London. 'For five pounds my wife became the owner of an elegant beige suit (two-piece). The suit did not wear out – twenty years later it was worn by our daughter, when she went on tourist trips.'

An oil burner for the heating of his dacha – 'only it must definitely be made in Sweden, only Sweden' – operated without a hitch for seventeen years, and the steam-boiler which replaced it, purchased in Germany, was of such high quality, that Botvinnik 'became popular among the workers of the Odintsovsky gas industry'. Tales about purchases with a discount of ten or even twenty per cent, skilful negotiations about prices, and his account of the memorable visit to Nottingham in 1936 transformed him into a sweet little Soviet tourist, who knew what he was about: 'I declined the boarding-house; it was no joke, paying through the nose for the two of us for a week – it was against my principles!'

The last edition of his book, which he was looking through a few months before his death, was called *At the Aim*. Smyslov, not without sarcasm, asked 'At which aim, strictly speaking?' The book had been expanded, compared with the previous one; the latest events are given, and god is rehabilitated, written with a capital G, as is customary now in Russia. This strikes a discord with the entire content of the book, but he humbly agreed to the innovation: 'Let it be so. It makes absolutely no difference to me.' Not long before his death he said: 'Yes, I am a communist in the spirit of the first communist on earth – Jesus Christ.' He was, of course, a believer, only he believed in some abstraction, allowed through the prism of his own 'I', his own predestination, his own truth.

He was a winner. He achieved his aim. Summing up, he talks about this at the very end of the book: 'Yes, the conditions in which people operate are changing. In time they dissolve into history, but genuine achievements remain.' He did not dissolve and he did not change. On the last pages of the book he is still the same Misha Botvinnik, pupil of the 157th School of United Workers in Leningrad and Komsomol member. He had not changed at all for seventy years, and, listening to his sincere and passionate monologue, one involuntarily thinks of Confucius: 'Only the most clever and the most stupid cannot change.'

Mistrustful and suspicious, possessing an iron will and rare purposefulness, woven out of contradictions, he was at the same time a very complete person. When he sat at the chess board or wrote about chess, Mikhail Botvinnik became what he will remain for ever in the history of the game: one of the most outstanding champions, who raised chess to a new level of all-round study and global preparation.

Chess, like everything then in the young republic of the Soviets, was permeated with ideology. There were directions, obligations, slogans and appeals. But compared with literature, history, philosophy or science, there was a difference. It consisted in chess itself. In an honest encounter at the board, in the game itself, the rules and principles of which have remained unchanged for centuries. A game, about which Lasker said: 'On the chess board there is no place for falsehood and hypocrisy. The beauty of a chess combination is that it is always truthful. The merciless truth, expressed in chess, eats the eyes of the hypocrite.' Therefore in chess in the Soviet Union, in contrast to literature or biology, there were no artificially created experts, exaggerated figures, or petty writers, whose names resounded then and have been completely forgotten today. For Levenfish, and for many before and after him in the Soviet Union, going into chess meant going into a refuge. A shelter where, despite all outward hindrances, in the end your skill and understanding of the events taking place on the sixty-four squares of the board were decisive.

When Levenfish became a professional chess player he was forty-four years old – a unique phenomenon in chess. Of course, he was already a very strong player with enormous experience, but now, for the first time in his life, he had the opportunity to study chess seriously and in earnest. The results immediately showed: together with Ilya Rabinovich, Levenfish won the 9th Championship of the Soviet Union, leaving behind all the young generation – Alatorsev, Belavenets, Kan, Lisitsyn, Makogonov,

Ragozin, Ryumin, Chekhover and Yudovich. All, except Botvinnik, who did not take part.

Levenfish played in the Moscow international tournaments of 1935 and 1936. He had good games alternating with blunders, often in winning positions, for example, in his game with Chekhover from the 1935 tournament, when victory would have lifted him to the very top of the tournament table. All his games with Lasker took an interesting course. Two of them ended in draws, while the game from the second half of the 1936 tournament, their last meeting, was won by Lasker, who gained revenge for his defeat in the first Moscow tournament in 1925.

It was not only at the chess board that Levenfish met Lasker. In the mid-thirties the former World Champion was living permanently in Moscow. Whereas inflation in Germany after the First World War had destroyed his material prosperity, now Hitler's coming to power signified a direct threat to his life. Lasker seriously considered emigrating. He was the son of a cantor and the grandson of a rabbi – not surprisingly, his first thought was Palestine. Elsa Lasker, the former wife of Emanuel Lasker's older brother Berthold, a Berlin doctor, had already been there more than once. Within a short time, she, a significant German poet, finally settled in Palestine.

In 1935 there began an exchange of letters between Lasker and the well-known Jewish scientist Tur-Sinai, whom Lasker had known back in Germany under the surname Turchiner. The talk was of granting Lasker a temporary professorship in mathematics at the Haifa Technion. This was not a simple matter; opportunities at the Technion were restricted, and besides, Palestine had been flooded by Jewish refugees from Germany with university education and of high intellectual level. The discussions came to nothing.

But there was also another country which Lasker had visited several times, and of which he retained the most favourable memories. This was Russia. Of course, now it had been transformed into the Soviet Union, but did not Shakhmatny Listok write back the winter of 1924: 'Greetings to the great chess thinker Emanuel Lasker, the first foreign guest of the USSR chess family!' Had they not greeted him then, like nowhere and at no other time in Europe?

He also remembered the Moscow tournament of 1925: crowds of enthusiastic supporters, and militia on horseback, holding back the pressure of the crowd who were unsuccessfully trying to penetrate into the Hall of Fountains in the Metropol Hotel, where the tournament was being played.

And the storm of applause and the shouts of 'Bravo, Lasker', when he left the stage. Or Capablanca, giving a simultaneous display in the Kremlin, in which members of the government of the Soviet Republic had taken part. Lasker made up his mind and after the tournament of 1935 he remained in the Soviet Union.

Before his match with Tarrasch in 1908 Lasker wrote: 'I am an admirer of force, healthy force, which goes to extremes to achieve the achievable.' Of course, at the time this was said about chess, but did he perhaps see such a force in the Soviet Union, the only force in Europe capable of opposing Nazism?

After the Nottingham tournament of 1936 he wrote: 'The young masters, and in particular Botvinnik, work a great deal on their game, and are undoubtedly enriching our chess mastery. I too wish to be in their ranks, since here in the Soviet Union, to where I have happily returned, I feel myself at home.'

In Moscow the ageing chess king was afforded truly royal honours. Soon, however, came the everyday routine. Outwardly everything looked very becoming: Lasker was a member of the Mathematics Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences, and he was enrolled as a trainer of the national team. From time to time he also gave simultaneous displays and lectures. For his lecture in the Leningrad Philharmonia in 1936 about the Alekhine-Euwe match, the hall was full. But gradually he became surrounded by silence. On account of the language barrier, his contacts were restricted to a very narrow circle of people. He and his wife tried to learn Russian, but this is not easy when you are nearly seventy. Of course, it was not only a question of the language. The deadly danger of contact with foreigners was obvious then to every citizen of the USSR. Those persons who dared to call on him were obviously under the complete control of the state security. He found himself in a vacuum.

This was the most violent time of the Great Terror and the narrow circle that surrounded Lasker was gradually depleted. It was also obvious that his telephone was being tapped and that his home help Yulia was bound to inform about his every step and every meeting. The fact that he was old and known throughout the world could not serve as a guarantee in those surreal, Orwellian times, when a state security investigator declared in 1937 to an imprisoned Jew, who had escaped from fascist Germany, that 'Jewish refugees from Germany are Hitler's agents abroad'. In the building where a few months earlier Lasker had been playing chess, there was now a succes-

sion of show trials and the headlines in all the newspapers unanimously demanded death.

About those times, when the everyday disappearance of citizens became a normal phenomenon, Boris Pasternak later wrote: 'One must write about what has happened such that the heart sinks and the hair stands on end.' Lasker must have known what was understood at that time by André Gide: 'I do not think that in any country today, even in Hitler's Germany, consciousness is so unfree, more oppressed, more frightened (terrorised), and more enslaved.' He must have guessed what was happening, after saying to himself: One can err, but one should not try to deceive oneself.

In October 1937, Lasker, who in total had spent about a year and a half in the Soviet Union, travelled to America. The nominal grounds were to visit the daughter of his wife by her first marriage – she was already awaiting them in Amsterdam. In reminiscences published after her husband's death, Marta Lasker talks about this trip as of a brief excursion with a definite return to Moscow. That is not the way it appears. From the side it rather resembled an escape.

In New York another life awaited him. There was no state apartment, and there was no post of trainer to the national team – effectively a paid sinecure – and there were certainly no mounted militia, holding back the crush of spectators, trying to get a glimpse of the participants in the New York tournament of 1940, the last tournament in his life. On the other hand, in America he obtained something else in return: a language, which he had known since his youth, human relations, to which he was accustomed, and the opportunity to say and write what he really thought.

In 1937 Levenfish won the ninth Soviet Championship. Again Botvinnik did not take part. He challenged Levenfish to a match. The match ended in a draw, 6½-6½, and Levenfish retained his title of USSR Champion. This was his finest hour and Levenfish dreamed about an international tournament. Botvinnik had already played abroad twice, in Hastings and in Nottingham, and Ragozin, whose successes were much modest than Levenfish's, had been allowed to take part in the tournament in Semmering.

But it was not competitive success that determined the Soviet participant in the 1938 AVRO-tournament. Botvinnik's personal contacts, his acquaintances in the highest circles of the Soviet elite, when one letter or telephone call could resolve any problem, the concept 'Soviet chess needs only one leader', his youth and political loyalty – all this resolved the matter. It was

Botvinnik who went to the tournament in Holland. Later Botvinnik himself was to say some clear enough, but also cruel words: 'In life I was fortunate. As a rule, my personal interests coincided with public interests. This, probably, is what constitutes genuine happiness. I was not alone. In my struggle for public interests I had support. But not all were as fortunate as I was. With some, their personal interests differed from public interests and these people interfered with my work. It was then that conflicts arose.'

Sergey Prokofiev, a passionate lover of chess, did not always remain in the role of observer or passive enthusiast. From time to time he performed the role of chess journalist. This is what he wrote for Tass about the AVRO-tournament: 'One could also say much about the other participants, but here I should like to remember one Soviet player, who, although not competing in Amsterdam, could have wrought considerable destruction there. I have in mind Levenfish, who displayed exceptional fighting qualities in his drawn match against Botvinnik.' The article never saw the light of day.

It was not only Levenfish who did not go to the AVRO-tournament. Lasker, who was finally written off as an old man, was also not invited. Tartakower commented: 'Nevertheless, even a half-alive Lasker plays no worse than any other strong grandmaster, and the invitation of Levenfish (on which Capablanca insisted in his discussions with the tournament organisers!) would also have been reasonable.'

This may be so, but probably neither the seventy-year-old Lasker, nor Levenfish, would have been able to rival the representatives of the younger generation, Keres and Fine, who won the tournament, and Botvinnik, who finished third.

Levenfish wrote an article about the results of the AVRO-tournament. Despite his bitterness and his dashed hopes, he was, as always, extremely objective. He obviously realised very well that Botvinnik was a player of enormous all-conquering power. In paying credit to his play, he wrote: 'We must dwell especially on the Botvinnik-Capablanca game, which would be assured of the brilliancy prize in any international tournament. This is an artistic production of the highest rank, which for decades to come will find its way into chess books. Such a game, in my view, is worth two first prizes and testifies to the continuing development of the Soviet grandmaster, who is now an undisputed contender for the world championship.'

For Levenfish himself this non-visit to Amsterdam signified the collapse of everything. This is how he evaluated it many years later: 'I thought that

my victories in the ninth and tenth USSR Championships and the draw in my match with Botvinnik would give me the right to participate in the AVRO-tournament. However, contrary to my hopes, I was not sent to this tournament. My condition could be defined as a moral knock-out. All my efforts of the preceding years had been in vain. I felt confident in my powers, and I would undoubtedly have competed honourably in the tournament. But I was 49 years old, and it was obvious that the coming years would tell adversely on the strength of my play. I was losing the last opportunity to display my worth. I gave up my chess career as lost, and although subsequently I participated in a few events, only in rare cases did I play with enthusiasm and competitive interest.'

Those distant times are remembered by Bronstein, Taimanov and Smyslov. They knew Levenfish when they were young, but they have been able to appreciate him properly only now, when they themselves have crossed the seventy-year age boundary. By looking at this human life in its entirety and not only in terms of the regalia and titles of champions.

In the words of Bronstein: 'I followed Levenfish's games back in 1934 and 1935, when I was still a child. In 1937 or 1938 he came to Kiev and stayed in the Continental Hotel. I and some other boys went to the hotel, to take him to a simultaneous display in the Pioneers' Palace. He was an outstanding grandmaster, a very deep player and a brilliant analyst, but then it was a different time, a different game. So as to really understand how he played, you must look at his games, since a generation that replaces a departing one judges it only by the openings. That was what I myself used to do, and now it is done so all the more, since practically everything depends on the opening.

'I remember how Grigory Yakovlevich told me that Capablanca had sent him a personal invitation to the AVRO-tournament, but Botvinnik interfered. He was like a hammer-man, he used to stand in a circle and wave his hammer around his head, driving everyone away.'

Taimanov commented: 'Grigory Yakovlevich Levenfish was my main teacher in the Leningrad Pioneers' Palace. His lessons were thorough, he had many of his own analyses and notes, and I appreciated him later when I began studying with Botvinnik. Generally speaking, Botvinnik never showed anything to anyone. He used to give homework on critical opening positions to his pupils and a week or two for analysis. After which he compared their conclusions with his own and employed the variations in practice. However, he did not hide this, and when he later won the USSR

Championship he thanked his pupils who had helped him in his preparations.

'I remember my first game with Grigory Yakovlevich in the Leningrad Championship, when I offered him a draw in a roughly equal position. 'Young man', replied Levenfish, 'you should wait for me to offer you a draw, since I am much older than you.' Then I timidly said: 'But in that case there is no one I will be able to offer a draw to in this tournament, since here they are all older than me.' He laughed, and a few moves later the game ended in a draw.

'The peak of his creative achievements was undoubtedly his match with Botvinnik, where he displayed himself to best advantage. Levenfish was a player of genuinely large-scale thinking and a deep strategist. As a person he was sarcastic and uncommunicative.'

Smyslov remembers how, as a boy, he followed the games of the Levenfish-Botvinnik match in 1937: 'Grigory Yakovlevich was in brilliant form and he played excellently. It was known that the championship in Tbilisi was due to recommend who to send to the AVRO-tournament. But at that time Mikhail Moiseevich was sent where he wanted and Grigory Yakovlevich did not have such high-ranking acquaintances. In addition, Botvinnik was a very correct young man, whereas by that time Levenfish was nearly fifty. There is no denying that Mikhail Moiseevich was playing well then, but I am talking about the rightful aspect of the question. Of course, Grigory Yakovlevich was not allowed to go abroad for the reason that he waged war against Mikhail Moiseevich. He committed a rash step... Therefore Grigory Yakovlevich annotated the games which I later won against Botvinnik with great pleasure.

'I observed him with keen interest when we played in the same tournament in Leningrad in 1939. He was an example for me in every aspect. Also playing in this tournament were Keres and Reshevsky. Officially it was called a training tournament. Reshevsky asked why it was called a training tournament. And they said to him: because there are no prizes, that is why it was a training tournament. I remember that Levenfish was playing Flohr and in the endgame he blundered and lost the game, although generally speaking his technique was very good. Then from the audience he was asked why he hadn't played this, defending passively? And he heatedly replied that he would have been playing there all night. But within fifteen minutes he sat down to another adjourned game with Ilya Rabinovich and won. And he was in a good mood again. I can see him now at analysis, tapping with a piece. He could also flare up, he was very emotional. He

was a gambler, and often a reckless gambler, in contrast, for example, to Romanovsky, who was more of a romantic, a pedagogue, a methodologist, surrounded by pupils. Did he understand what was meant by Soviet power and in what sort of country he was living? Yes, Grigory Yakovlevich understood perfectly well, and understood better than many.'

The tournament in 1939 in Leningrad was the last international tournament in which Levenfish took part. However, it could only arbitrarily be called international. Effectively the only foreigners were Keres, appearing for Estonia, for the moment independent, and the American Reshevsky. Flohr and Lilienthal were by now living in the Soviet Union, which was represented by a further fourteen participants. But even if this is counted, Levenfish played only five international tournaments in his entire career, the three in Moscow and that distant memorable one in Carlsbad in 1911. His chess career was over. In the nine pre-war championships of the country he twice finished first, twice second, and three times third. He played against six world champions. The balance of these meetings was as follows: with Lasker, Euwe and Alekhine: equal, with Capablanca: a minus one score, with Smyslov: plus one, and more than twenty games with Botvinnik gave a small advantage to the latter: eight wins for Botvinnik and six for Levenfish.

Within a few years Levenfish was again forced to give up chess for several years when World War II began. Subsequently he would have this to say about this period: 'The difficult years of the Patriotic War and working in a factory finally undermined my health. I was no longer capable of withstanding the tension in a lengthy event. I could play an individual game quite well, but then I would become tired and concede points without a fight.' Immediately after the end of the war Levenfish returned to Leningrad. Here he was seen for the first time by the very young Kortchnoi and Spassky.

Viktor Kortchnoi went to see Levenfish to study with him in 1946: 'I was fifteen years old. I can still remember that we looked at the Catalan. I can see him in the club at the card table playing vint, a Russian variation of bridge. He gave me the impression of being a very cultured man, witty and developed in all respects. I realised that this was a man from another world. When I got to know Botvinnik and began comparing, the comparison was not in favour of Botvinnik, who, next to Levenfish, seemed a shallow person, and whose humour was somehow petty. Botvinnik was a Soviet intellectual, who have it implanted, in contrast to Levenfish, who was an

intellectual by blood and by pre-Revolutionary education. He saw things more broadly, thought differently, spoke foreign languages.

‘As a player Levenfish was, of course, a tactician. Although, as a cultured chess player he was a master of all methods of play, it was as a tactician that he was especially strong. No, he was not an acrimonious person. He had a sharp sense of humour, but acrimonious: no. At any event, he never offended me. I won against him several times, but he conducted himself with dignity after a defeat, and always remained correct, even though I was then a boy compared with him.

‘He won a fantastic game against me in 1953. He landed a colossal blow, and later wrote in his comments that Kortchnoi was said to be an excellent tactician, but he had overlooked this blow.’

Spassky was deeply impressed when in Leningrad in the Pioneers’ Palace, Levenfish demonstrated the game Alekhine-Yates, which Alekhine had won brilliantly: ‘I remembered this game for ever, and also the manner in which Levenfish demonstrated it, accessible and modest. Players greatly respected Grigory Yakovlevich. But they could not endure Botvinnik, except, of course, those who did not know him personally and who were deafened by the fanfares, or had merely gained their information from the papers. His manner of delivery was overwhelming and categorical. How Levenfish regarded Botvinnik was understandable, and when young Misha won the match against Botvinnik, Grigory Yakovlevich was very pleased, and not only because Tal had introduced a fresh order into chess.

‘Initially Zak wanted to hand me over to Levenfish and I had a meeting with him. This was in 1951, when I was fourteen years old. I showed him my games, variations, and got very excited, just like the young Kasparov. After all, we were all geniuses when we were young. And after that I visited him again, and I was all eyes. He possessed an enormous natural talent, and he was an outstanding player.

‘The fact that he was harsh, with a prickly tongue: well, how could he not be prickly, when Soviet life had practically destroyed him? But at heart he was responsive and very subtle. Everyone greatly respected him and I was not surprised that the first question that Bogatyrchuk asked me in Canada in 1967 was about Levenfish. When I replied that Grigory Yakovlevich had died several years earlier, Bogatyrchuk said: ‘What a pity. After all, we understood each other so well...’ There were very few like Levenfish. I cannot imagine that anything apart from good could be said about him. He did a great thing for me. When I was still a boy, he managed to obtain a

stipend for me. In a word – a pure soul. But also a tragic one. He was a genuine chess martyr.’

In 1947, as reserve for the Soviet team, Levenfish travelled to England to take part in the England-USSR match. This was Levenfish’s first trip outside the Soviet Union. It brought him nothing but trouble.

In life it sometimes happens that unimportant, insignificant events have unexpected, far-reaching consequences. In 1910 in Wilno, now Vilnius, Levenfish played a match with a player by the name of List. As List himself maintained, his real name was Odes, and he was also a native of Odessa. In order to avoid confusion when receiving letters (to Odes in Odessa), he changed his name. Anyway, the match ended in a draw and almost faded from Levenfish’s memory. Thirty-seven years later in London he ran into his old acquaintance, who joyfully greeted him. This scene did not go unnoticed either by the leaders of the Soviet team, or by the grandmasters who reported on anything reprehensible to the security authorities. The behaviour of a Soviet citizen abroad was always strictly regulated and here the violation was obvious: an old connection and contact with a representative of a capitalist country, ideologically hostile to the Soviet state. Levenfish remembered later in confidential conversations that he had ‘major problems’. He never again travelled abroad. Soon he moved to Moscow, but there too difficult times awaited him.

As Konstantinopolsky wrote: ‘On the part of the sports authorities Levenfish constantly encountered a prejudiced and even malevolent attitude. He had a prickly tongue, he liked to speak his mind, and this did not go down well.’

He was the only Soviet grandmaster not to receive a stipend. ‘He lived in great poverty’, Yakov Neishtadt recalls, ‘in a room with firewood heating in a communal flat. One could sometimes meet him in the Artists’ Café opposite the Khudozhestvenny Theatre. Even here he stood out by his bearing, his manner, his way of speaking. He was very hard-up, but he never complained to anyone about anything.’

He was, after all, an aristocrat in spirit and by education. It is well known that one advantage of being an aristocrat is that it gives a person the strength to endure hardship better.

Smyslov remembers: ‘Grigory Yakovlevich was a highly intelligent person, but he lived a poor life. A difficult life. In his last few years he came to me with a stack of paper, the manuscript of his book on rook endings, and asked me to check it. We spent many days under a lamp made of Sèvres

porcelain, analysing and talking. It was he who said that it was Sèvres porcelain. I knew that the lamp was old, but Grigory Yakovlevich immediately recognised it. I checked his analyses and made corrections in places, but it was he who did all the hard work.

‘To this day it gnaws at my heart that I was not at his funeral. I had an adjourned game, I think it was with Khasin, and it was resumed on the day of the funeral. I tried everything to win it, but I didn’t win, of course. See what human vanity leads to...’

In this period Levenfish did a lot of writing. Back in 1925 his book for beginners had been published and in 1940, under his editorship, the monumental *Sovremenny Debyut* appeared, which was the prototype of the present-day *Encyclopaedia of Chess Openings*. Its publication was interrupted by the War, and only the first volume on the Open Games was published. This was effectively the first database, assembled by hand, on the state of theory at that time. The difference was that Levenfish explained in words what today is concealed behind soulless signs.

His thoughts, expressed more than fifty years ago about the opening stage of the game, to which today too amateurs and professionals devote nearly all their study time, sound unusually topical: ‘The study of opening systems has reached such a high degree of development, that the transition into the middlegame, and sometimes even into the endgame, is predestined by the playing of the opening. Sometimes no amount of ingenuity in the middlegame can compensate for opening errors. However, one should not transform the opening into some kind of fetish and spend all one’s energy on the studying of opening systems.’

Apart from *Sovremenny Debyut*, Levenfish also wrote several other books and a considerable number of articles. His book on the theory of rook endings, written jointly with Smyslov, remains to this day one of the best reference works on the endgame. Levenfish’s manner of writing is characterised by clarity of thought, short, well-finished phrases, clearly transmitting the essence, and a highly cultured style. All these qualities, combined with his humour and unfailing benevolence to his audience displayed themselves to an even greater extent when he gave lectures, or took classes. Romanovsky later remembered: ‘Attempts to associate chess mastery with pedagogical mastery are a great delusion. Only one person combines high pedagogy with great mastery – Levenfish.’

Levenfish wrote not only about the improvement of the chess player or on theoretical topics. The May 1950 issue of the magazine *Shakhmaty v SSSR*

published a review, written by Levenfish, of Botvinnik's recently published book of selected games. This article expressed not only Levenfish's views on the play of Botvinnik, but also that of Chigorin, Alekhine and Rubinstein, on society's attitude to chess and on the meaning of the 'Soviet Chess School'. He wrote this article at a time when the absence of freedom of the printed word was an everyday reality. Yet, he directly and emotionally retained the virtue of saying and writing what he thought. Constantly watching, of course, the limits, which could not be crossed under any circumstances.

Tracing the career of the then World Champion, Levenfish wrote: 'At the age of sixteen Botvinnik was distinguished by the soberness and, one can say, dryness of his chess thinking, analytical talent, self-criticism, capacity for work and great theoretical erudition. He was already a developed master with defined tastes. Botvinnik quickly eliminated the deficiencies of his early years such as tactical oversights. He deepened his knowledge of positional subtleties, improved his endgame technique, and by the time he was twenty he had won the USSR Championship. At the age of twenty-five Botvinnik had won international tournaments and was a candidate for the world championship.' And later: 'What constitutes Botvinnik's main strength? What is the secret of his victories over the strongest players in the world? The conclusion inevitably suggests itself that up till now the world champion's opponents have been unable to resolve the first main problem – that of countering Botvinnik's opening strategy and, like it or not, they have gone into the middlegame with inferior chances. But in this stage of the game too Botvinnik's mastery is at a very high level. His technique of accumulating small advantages and transforming them into a win recalls the best games of Rubinstein and Capablanca. ... Botvinnik's book is a triumph of strength, logic and analysis. It is noteworthy that, even when Botvinnik goes in for double-edged variations, for which his opponent has prepared beforehand, even then Botvinnik's analysis triumphs.'

Botvinnik was extremely offended by this description of his play. Although positive, it did indeed stand out in the collective panegyric choir, resounding from the pages of all the publications of that time, declaring Botvinnik to be the direct descendent of Chigorin and Alekhine. Even now, fifty years later, it seems to me that it very subtly and objectively paints us a portrait of one of the most significant champions in the entire history of the game. Before replying himself, Botvinnik first gave Rokhlin and Romanovsky the opportunity to speak out. Whereas the latter largely restricted himself to theoretical and historical digressions, Rokhlin fired at

Levenfish arguments of a different calibre. He wrote in particular: 'Over the course of many years G.Y. Levenfish has been unable to see in the play of Botvinnik and other young Soviet masters that which is fundamentally valuable and new, which in our day has opened a new chapter in the history of chess. It is not by coincidence that we emphasise the scientific approach to chess as the distinguishing feature of the Soviet chess school. In this respect, Botvinnik, as an innovator of chess thinking, like many other figures in Soviet culture, remembers well the wonderful words of comrade Stalin about science, which 'does not recognise fetishes, is not afraid to raise the hand against the old and obsolescent and listens keenly to the voice of experience and practice'. After Romanovsky and Rokhlin there also followed replies by others, less well known. There have always, at all times, been dirty dealings in chess, but in the grave times of the Soviet Union they acquired an especially sinister shade.

The final word was expressed by the world champion himself in an article 'Regarding three statements', with a sub-title, typical of those times: 'As a matter of criticism and self-criticism'. He wrote: 'It is not the 'Botvinnik problem' that should be under discussion, but the Soviet chess school. Could Soviet masters, who were set a serious aim by our Party, by the Soviet people, that is winning of the world championship, have developed such 'creative' tendencies? Of course not. We had to defeat foreign masters, and defeat them for sure. In his review grandmaster Levenfish ignores this fact, and also ignores the Soviet chess school, an obvious and fundamental mistake by the reviewer.'

After arguments of this calibre, which were well known to Akhmatova and Pasternak, Shostakovich and Prokofiev, any discussion was ruled out. One could only await the consequences. In a society, where living beings were sacrificed for abstract concepts, the reaction that followed could have been the most severe. The fate of Defoe, who for his political pamphlets stood in the pillory in London for an hour a day three hundred years ago, could have seemed enviable. However, the matter ended with these criticisms and it was surprising that more severe measures against Levenfish were not taken.

The last years of Levenfish's life were spent working, writing articles and books, in poverty... Old age arrived, but the pain of the life he had lived was still there. During all these years he became hardened and as though fossilised. He could also have said: I am healthy, for the moment my heart has withstood even that which I have not described.

In 1961 Boris Spassky was playing in the USSR Championship. In one of the last days of January in the Moscow subway he saw Levenfish: 'Aged, pale, like an apparition, he was walking along holding his head in his hands. 'I have just had six teeth removed' was all he could say.' A few days later Grigory Yakovlevich Levenfish died.

Remembering the Third Moscow tournament of 1936, Botvinnik wrote: 'In June in Moscow there was a heat-wave and playing was very difficult. It was hot even in the Hall of Columns of the House of Unions, where the tournament was held. It was even hot at night. I became very tired and suffered from sleeplessness.' But it was not only Botvinnik who suffered from sleeplessness. Emanuel Lasker, who had settled in Moscow after the tournament of 1935, also did not sleep. When he was living in Germany, he was accustomed to staying up until late at night in chess cafés. In Moscow such a way of life was impossible. But in one's declining years it is not easy to change one's habits. Levenfish would come to him quite often and they would spend long evenings at the chess board or in conversation. Once, late at night, Lasker suggested: 'Let's go and have a coffee.' 'In Moscow? At this time?' his companion tried to return him to reality. 'Let's go, let's go, I know a little place', the Doctor smiled conspiratorially. 'The buffet at the Kiev Railway Station is open until three in the morning.'

Two persons with characteristic features walk around a sleeping city. Two symbols of their times, having lived the greater part of their lives in cities, the names of which were to personify the history of the twentieth century: Berlin and St Petersburg/Leningrad. Within three years the Second World War will begin. Two years after that Lasker will die in New York. He will never again see the country in which he lived nearly all his life. Levenfish will outlive him by twenty years and will die in Moscow. Despite pogroms, inflation, wars and revolution, despite the cruel regimes established in the countries where they lived, both will exceed the biblical age of seventy years.

But they do not know this yet.

They are drinking coffee. They are talking in German.

Moscow. Kiev Railway Station. Night. The hot summer of 1936.

In August 1991, when Botvinnik turned eighty, he was in Brussels. A few days later he arrived in Holland. The summer tourist season was not yet

over and the Amsterdam taxi moved slowly towards the centre, before coming to a halt by the Mint Tower.

‘Look, Mikhail Moiseevich’, I said, ‘on the left is the flower market, and straight ahead in the corner is the Carlton Hotel. When Euwe was eighty, there was a big reception here. Max looked so splendid! Who could have thought that within just a few months...’ ‘Gennady Borisovich!’ – Botvinnik was sitting beside the driver and looking directly ahead – ‘I was in the Carlton Hotel in 1938. You weren’t yet born. The following day after the conclusion of the AVRO-tournament, I drank tea there with Alekhine and discussed the conditions of a match for the world championship. Yes, things that happened long ago’, he sighed, ‘tales of olden times...’

The car began to move.

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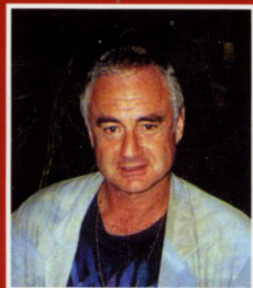
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